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The Seeds of Murder

HUGH PENTECOST
The Girl Who Lived Dangerously

P. G. WODEHOUSE
Jeeves and the Stolen Venus

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG
The Ring in the Fish

DASHIELL HAMMETT
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Smoke Rings

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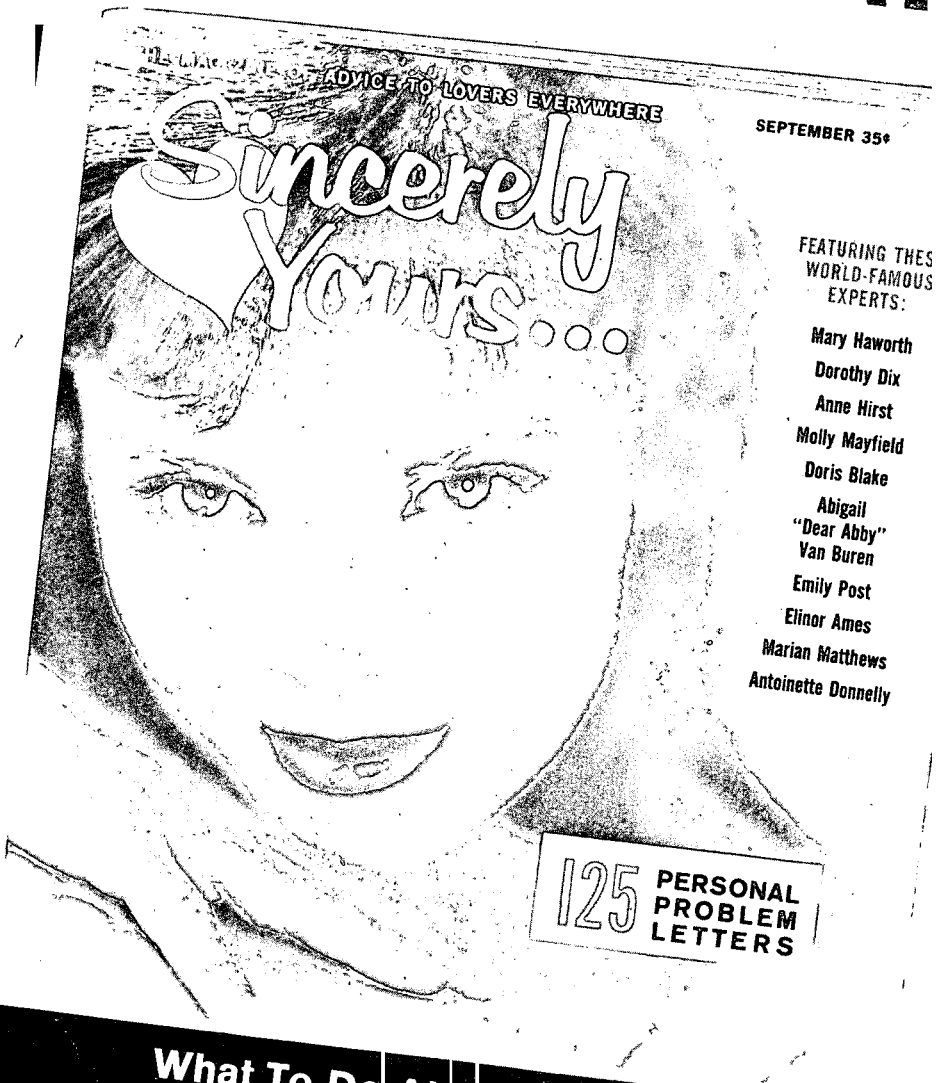

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

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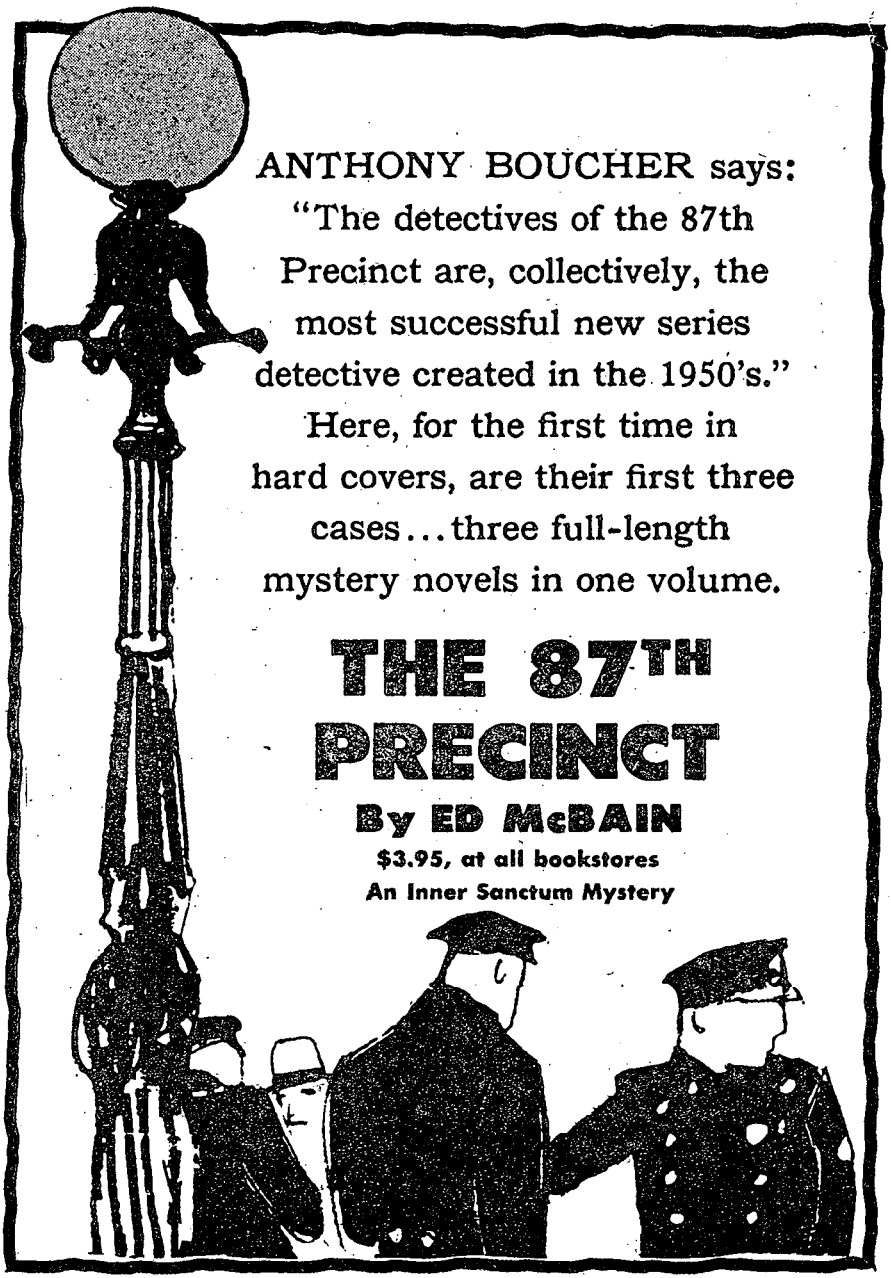

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG**

TITLE: ***The Ring in the Fish***

TYPE: Crime-Puzzle Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *"Believe me," Joe snorted, "Xaviers and Xanders are few and far between. We'll take that chance. Now, here is what we are going to do . . ."*

SALLY CASSIDY FOUND THE RING IN the fish. Her husband, Jim, had caught the fish in the ocean. Sally, in a fit of virtue, had offered, for once, to clean it. And there, embedded in the innards, was a diamond solitaire.

Sally was awed and delighted. Treasure from the sea! She considered the ring to be her very own, on several grounds. First, finders keepers. Second, it was obviously her reward for unusual virtue. Third, while she didn't actually need a diamond ring, still this was the darndest thing that had ever happened to her and she didn't want to give up the evidence.

But Jim Cassidy had to be stuffy, and since he was an honest man and had virtues, too, *he* said they would have to advertise. "We can't legally or morally keep it without at least trying to find the real owner. Now, Sal, you know that."

"Oh, shucks," said Sally, who knew it well enough, "but we are going to be very careful." Her blue eyes looked resolute. "All kinds of gyp artists might come around."

"Just ask them to describe the ring," Jim said. "If they can, that's the proof."

Sally wanted to know how one described a ring.

"Well," said Jim, "it was somebody's engagement ring. How about the initials inside the band? Why not give two of them, which would help find the owner, but

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hold back the other two and see who knows what they are?"

Sally agreed. She composed the ad.

Found in a fish: a diamond solitaire ring. O.M. can claim ring if able to state other two initials.

" You know," said Jim, "we could read the O.M. upside down and backwards—that way it would be W.O."

"I'm going to put it this way," Sally said, and she wrote:

Found in a fish: diamond solitaire ring. Finder will return to O.M. or W.O. if party can supply other two initials.

"It really is strange," she said to Jim. "Strange and wonderful."

Jim looked at her dreaming face and was sorry she couldn't keep the ring without any more fuss or bother. He was honest, but he sometimes did not say all that he was thinking. He did not tell Sally how, deep in the sea, that particular fish might have found the ring on a drowned finger. Sally hadn't thought of it, and it wasn't a pleasant thing to think about, and he didn't want to spoil her pleasure. He did say that she could hope nobody would turn up in a reasonable period, and after that she could keep the ring and they would both feel better about it.

Sally was sure somebody would turn up. But she wasn't going to give the treasure to any mere claimant without proof. That she vowed . . .

Now there was a man named Joe who saw the ad and thought about it for a long time. Finally he said to his wife, Agnes, "I see the ad's still running. I think we'll go after this diamond ring. Why not? A diamond is a diamond," Joe added with lip-smacking noises.

"How are you going to guess what the other two initials are?" said Agnes scornfully. "Got a crystal ball?"

"I've got a brain," said Joe. He was proud of his brain. He considered himself much too brilliant, for instance, to go to work. "I won't be guessing. I've figured it out. First place, the letters must be engraved in a simple form. See why? These folks who found the ring don't know which way the letters are up. Look what it says: O.M. or W.O. If they couldn't be sure which way to read them, then the *other pair* of initials must also be letters that can be read upside down and backwards."

"Of course"

"How many letters are there like that? I'll tell you. I've studied the alphabet. M, or W, and O—and besides those there are only three more. H, I, and X. All right, nobody's name starts with X."

"Xavier," she said. "And I knew a man once named Harry Xander."

"Once," Joe snorted. "Believe me, Xaviers and Xanders are few and far between. We'll take that chance. Now, here is what we are going to do . . ."

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So one morning this Joe came to Sally Cassidy's door. "Good morning, Madam, I've come about the ring. I believe you advertised . . .?"

"Oh, yes. Come in." Sally looked him over.

Sally Cassidy was friendly with a neighbor whose husband was newly retired from the police department, and so Sally had been able to learn a good deal, she felt, about criminals, and especially about confidence men. When she noted that Joe was shabby, thin, white-haired, with a benevolent face and a limber tongue, she was immediately on guard.

"My name," he said, "is Oscar Moore. I am wondering if you can possibly have found the engagement ring I purchased for my darling bride . . ."

"How would it get into a fish?" asked Sally.

Joe was too smart to try to answer. *He* didn't know whether the fish in question had come from salt or fresh water and he didn't intend to guess. So he spoke right over Sally's question. "Oh, my dear lady, if you *have* found it, it will be like a miracle. Harriet and I . . . Please tell me quickly. My wife's maiden name was Harriet Innes. Are the initials in the ring O.M. and H.I.?"

"No, they are not," said Sally with considerable pleasure. "I am sorry Mr. . . er . . . Moore, was it?"

"Ah, I am sorry, too," he said sadly. "No miracle for us, then. The letters are very clear, are they?"

"Oh, very clear."

"Is the . . . er . . . ring here?"

"I'm sure you will understand," said Sally sweetly, "why I can't show you the ring or tell you what the remaining letters really are. Good morning."

Joe took offense, for nothing offends like the truth, and with a stiff bow he showed that he resented the implication that he might be party to a fraud. He went away.

Late that same afternoon the little woman came. "Mrs. Cassidy?" she said timidly, "I wonder if the ring you found is mine." Agnes had no make-up on, and looked quite unlike her usual brassy self. "Oh, I do hope so. The loss has been such a sorrow. You see, I am a widow and that ring meant so much to me." The tears that came to Agnes's eyes were real. "My husband's name was Henry Ives."

"Oh?"

"And my name was Winifred Owen. Are the initials in the ring H.I. and W.O.?"

"No, they are not," said Sally rather coolly. The act, she thought, was terrible. She watched the woman go down the block and get into a car driven by a man. Sally went at once to her telephone.

In the car, when Agnes told him,

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Joe became furious. His brain was being insulted. "She's lying," he said. "It has got to be one or the other. If it isn't O.M. and H.I., then, turned over, it can't be I.H. and W.O. It has *got* to be H.I. and W.O.!"

"Oh, skip it," said Agnes. "There's an X in it, I suppose."

"I don't believe it," raved Joe. "Come on, we'll go back together."

Sally was still on the phone when she saw the two of them returning. She was frightened and she said so into the phone.

Sally let them in, and Joe was temporarily suave again. "This lady and I," he said, "are somewhat puzzled. It seems to us, Mrs. Cassidy, beyond the range of coincidence that there should be two of us, each with the correct initials quoted in your ad, and each with a spouse whose initials are also able to read upside down and backwards. And yet you say this ring belongs to neither of us?"

"That's what I say," Sally affirmed.

"I am afraid we will have to insist," Joe looked quite ready to insist by force, "that you show us the ring, Mrs. Cassidy."

"I don't have to do that," Sally said.

"Madam, if you are trying to keep someone's property for yourself . . ."

Sally's ears caught the sound they had been listening for. She said gaily, "You know, *I* think it is beyond the range of coincidence, too. In fact, I think you are crooks, working together."

"Now, Madam, it isn't wise to make such accusations."

"You just accused me," Sally pointed out.

"All we ask is to be shown the ring." Joe took some menacing steps.

"Don't come any nearer," Sally warned, backing toward her kitchen door.

"Are you saying that one of those initials *is* an X?" demanded Joe. "That's the only other possibility."

"No, it isn't," said Sally.

Through the kitchen door stepped the ex-policeman neighbor.

"Well, well," he said happily, "if it isn't Joey. And Lippy Agnes, too. You're wanted, Joe. If Agnes isn't wanted I'm sure she ought to be, so you had both better come along with me."

There were some angry shouts, but no real resistance.

The man, Joe, turned around at the door and said to Sally Cassidy, "What are the letters in that ring? They have got to be either H.I. or I.H.—*got* to be. Or is there an X?"

Sally took pity. "There is no X. There is no I. There is no H," she said. "If the groom's name comes first, then Mr. O.M. gave the ring to Miss W.O. Either way up, forwards or backwards."

Joe went off mumbling. He cursed his brain which had not

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remembered that the *same initials* can occur in different names.

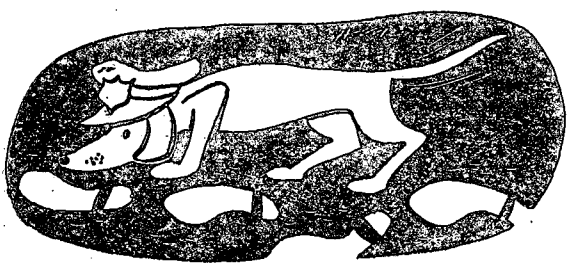
Sally got the ring out and tried it on. Jim Cassidy came roaring home. "Sally, are you all right? Those criminals!"

"In three more days the time is up and the ring is mine," dreamed Sally. "Criminals are stupid, I guess." Her eyes came up, honest and intelligent. "Do you think she's drowned, poor Miss W.O.? Wanda. Wendy. Maybe Wilhelmina."

"Maybe." Jim hugged her. "But she wouldn't have wanted *them* to have her ring."

"In a fish," Sally murmured. "So strange and sad . . ." It wasn't her brain, it was her heart that added, "We'll never know who they were —O.M. and W.O.—but we'll always remember them."

EDITORS' NOTE: ***What is the flaw in this story? No readers' contest this time—we expect too many of you to spot the error! But just in case it eludes you, please turn to the bottom of page 48.***



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HUGH PENTECOST**

TITLE: ***The Girl Who Lived Dangerously***

TYPE: Detective Novelette

DETECTIVES: Jeff Larigan and Alan Quist

LOCALE: New York

TIME: About 1948

COMMENTS: *It started with the tawdry murder of a mysterious shill in a cheap carnival — and it ended with a fabulous poker game in which the stakes were more than money.*

"HEY, BUD! YOU GOT A MATCH?" As soon as the sucker turned around I knew I had him hooked. He'd been standing about ten feet away, looking down the carnival midway inhaling the smell of fried onions and hamburgers and listening to the wheezy music of the merry-go-round calliope.

He came over to my counter, pulling a couple of wooden kitchen matches out of his pants pocket. He handed the matches to me, at the same time looking at my layout.

"Ever play this game?" I asked him.

He shook his head. He was tall, with big, trusting eyes and the scrubbed look the yokels manage to acquire when they're out on a spree.

"It's called Skill-O," I said. "Let me show you how it works. You see this bowling pin in the center of the counter?"

He nodded again.

"Now, this ball, hanging by this chain from the ceiling, is what you play with. You hold the ball alongside the pin like this—then you swing it out. If it knocks down the pin on the backswing, you get one of those beautiful pigskin traveling bags. And I don't mind telling you they're worth at least twenty-five bucks, wholesale."

He looked doubtful, so I held the ball to one side of the pin and swung it out. It knocked the pin down coming back.

"Go ahead," I said. "Try it for

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free. It's good for business to have someone playing the game."

He took hold of the ball, hesitantly, and swung it out. It knocked down the pin coming back. He looked at me, his eyes lit up.

"Four chances for a dollar," I told him.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a modest roll of bills. I suppose he'd been saving up for quite a while to lose this dough at the carnival. I didn't see why I shouldn't have most of it. He handed me a buck, and I told him to go ahead and play.

Of course, this time he didn't knock down the pin. Any high school kid who knows anything about physics would know it was impossible if it was on the level. You hold that ball on one side of the pin and swing it and it'll miss by just as much on the other side coming back. It couldn't possibly knock the pin down unless there was a way to move the pin. And of course there was a way to do it.

After he'd lost his buck I offered him another free try. "Just to get the hang of it," I told him.

This time he knocked it down.

"You may think there's something not strictly on the up and up about this," I told him. "I want to show you that there's no way I can move the pin." I picked it up and showed him there was a hole in the bottom of the pin, and that this hole fitted over a peg in the counter. "You see," I told him, "there's no way I can possibly move the pin. It's a game of pure skill."

What I didn't tell him was that there was a way to move the peg, which I could do with my knee under the counter. I could make him win or lose at will.

He invested another buck, without any luck, then started to turn away. There was a crowd around us now, and a little dark guy pushed forward.

"I'd like to try this game," he said, "only I'd like our friend here to swing the ball for me. He's the only one I've seen knock the pin down."

The yokel acted shy, but the little dark guy persuaded him to swing the ball. This time he knocked the pin down. I handed over a handsome suitcase to the little dark guy, who thanked the yokel and left.

"I hate to see you lose your money when you're just getting the hang of it," I told the yokel.

He slowly produced another buck. It never occurred to him that the little dark guy was a shill, working for me. That this little dark guy, whose name was Joe Tamarak, would walk down the midway till he was out of sight, duck in behind the concessions, and bring that suitcase back to the tent behind my layout.

So the sucker, chewing on the inside of his mouth in an attempt to concentrate, tried the game four more times without any luck:

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"I'll git this yet," he said determinedly, and reached for another buck. He was just handing it over to me when I heard the gunshots. There were four of them, and they came from directly behind me in the tent.

They didn't cause too much excitement because they sounded a lot like the backfiring of the motorcycles in the big tank. But I knew the difference.

I left the sucker holding his dollar bill out toward me and beat it back into the tent.

Joe Tamarak, the shill, was lying face down on the trampled turf, his fingers clawing at the grass. There'd been soft-nosed bullets in the gun, and they'd made four apple-sized holes in his back. I couldn't turn him over.

"Jeff!" he said weakly, and there were red bubbles on his lips.

"Who did it?" I asked him.

He just groaned.

"Did you see who it was?"

"Jeff, you got to listen to me—"

"You keep still," I said, "I'll get a doctor and the cops."

"No!" He tried to move, and blood welled up out of the corners of his mouth. "Listen," he said thickly.

You didn't have to be an M.D. to know there wasn't anything that could be done for him. "What is it, Joe?" I said.

"Card game," he said. "New York. Big-time stuff. I—I had a sucker—cattleman from the Argentine. I—steered him into a game and I was to get a cut. They—they let him win the first night—eight thousand smackers. The next night they—were going to take him. But he didn't show. He—he took it over the fence with the dough."

Joe started to choke and cough. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped his lips.

"They told me—get the guy back or get the dough up or—or—"

"Or else," I said.

He blinked his eyes. "I had to lam out—you understand, Jeff? I couldn't—raise the money or find the Argentine. That's—that's how I happened to be with the carnival."

"You figure it was someone in the game caught up with you?" I asked.

"Must have been, Jeff. I thought I'd given them the slip, but—"

"Who ran the game?"

"Lloyd—" he said, and started choking again.

"Lloyd who?" I asked.

"The—The Mountain," he said.

And then Joe Tamarak died.

The local state's attorney in that little New York State town was not overflowing with the spirit of good will. He didn't like carnivals, and he wanted to clear up the murder quick and, if possible, hang it on somebody in the show.

He was a thin, bald little guy named Wilson with an aggressive manner.

"Your name?" he asked me. We

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were sitting in his office, with a stenographer taking down what I said.

"Jeff Larigan."

"Your address?"

"Santa Barbara, California—when I'm home."

"Your age?"

"Fifty-eight."

"Your profession?"

"Show business," I said.

That was only a half-truth. Working in the carnival wasn't my regular routine. I've been a hustler ever since I can remember, but big time, you understand. I used to be one of the best card mechanics and dicemen in the business. I've played the cruise boats, the big gambling houses, the railroad trains, and thousands of private set-ups. Then, about two years ago, I was taking a bunch of suckers to the cleaners on a cruise boat, when I fumbled in the middle of a deal. The suckers were too green to realize what had happened. But I knew. My fingers weren't as agile as they used to be and it was time for me to quit.

I bought a gas station out on the coast near Santa Barbara and settled down to sampling honesty and respectability. Out there I ran into an ex-G.I. named Alan Quist, who was trying to locate some hustler who'd knocked off a friend of his. To locate this guy, Quist had to learn something about the trade. So I taught him, and later came East with him. When that job was done, I ran into a friend of mine who was running this carnival, and decided it would be fun to spend the summer touring the provinces.

Wilson brought me back to earth. "Was the deceased working for you?"

"If that means Joe Tamarak, the answer is yes."

"Never mind the wisecracks," Wilson said. "What did Tamarak do for you?"

That was one I wouldn't answer. "Helped me with my stuff—packing and unpacking, running errands, cleaning up."

Wilson looked straight at me with his unfriendly eyes. "He was a shill for that Skill-O game, wasn't he?"

I looked innocent. "Shill?" I said.

"Skip it," Wilson said. "How long has he worked for you?"

"Since we took to the road this spring."

"Did you know him before that?"

"No."

In the back of my mind I was trying to think what I *did* know about Joe. The first day I was on the lot with the carnival he came up and asked if I didn't need someone to shill for me. He was a quiet little guy you wouldn't notice particularly, a good type for a confidence racket or a come-on routine, because you'd never suspect him. He never talked about himself to me, and I didn't ask questions. I did notice his nerves were a little shaky, but it wasn't any of my business, I thought.

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"Where did he come from?" Wilson asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"About tonight. You were working your Skill-O game when the shots were fired?"

"Yes," I said. "And lucky for me there were several witnesses to that."

"Damn' lucky!" Wilson growled.

I grinned at him. It would have been a lot simpler for him if he could have tagged me with it. Fight between boss and employee.

"Who was he feuding with in the carnival?" Wilson asked.

"Everybody liked him," I said. "He was a quiet little guy who didn't nose into anybody else's business."

"Okay." Wilson sighed. "You got to him first and he died before anyone else got there. What did he tell you?"

"We've already been over that," I said. "I told you what he said."

"What did he mean by 'the mountain'?"

"Mr. Wilson, you've got me," I said. "Maybe he was delirious."

But I didn't think so, really. You see, I had a pretty good idea what Joe meant.

That was that as far as Wilson was concerned. Nobody knew where Joe Tamarak hailed from, and the carnival crew took up a collection to have him buried there in the town. The show was supposed to have played there another day, but Wilson closed us down. That meant there was a two-day gap before we opened at the next stop. If it hadn't been for that I might have stayed out of trouble.

Joe Tamarak didn't mean anything to me. He was a nice little guy, but he didn't mean anything to me. All the same, if he was telling the truth, he'd got a pretty rough deal. It wasn't his fault the Argentine fall guy turned out to be no fall guy at all.

I know the rules, you understand. I know you don't welch on bets. I know a crooked game like that would hold the steerer responsible. But four slugs in the back is pretty rough treatment. I was curious about a mob that would act that way. You'd have thought they'd have been more interested in getting back the eight Gs. Maybe Joe had lied to me. Maybe he and the Argentine guy had planned to take the gamblers. Maybe they'd split the take between them. But then, I asked myself, why would Joe lie when he knew he was dying?

So I had two days on my hands, and instead of being sensible and lying around in the sun in the country, I took a train for New York.

I figured maybe if I went to The Mountain I might find some of the answers to Joe Tamarak's story. I was just curious and I had the time. Those could have come under the head of "famous last words."

The Mountain is a man. His real name is Teliski and he is a bookie.

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He is called The Mountain because he's the fattest guy you ever saw and because it's smart nowadays to give people nicknames like that.

The Mountain is a character. He has his office in the back booth of a Broadway bar and grill. He just sits there with a pad and pencil and writes down bets as people come in to place them. He tears off the little pieces of paper and stuffs them in his pockets. When he reaches in his pockets for a cigarette, or a sharp pencil, he pulls out half a dozen of these little slips and they float down to the floor. Then he has to get someone to pick them up for him, because he can't bend over without risking apoplexy.

When I got to New York I went to this bar and grill. I hadn't seen The Mountain for five or six years, but it might have been yesterday for all the reaction I got from him when I sat down opposite him in the booth. His eyes are small and dark; sunk in his fat face, they look like raisins in a rice pudding, and with about as much expression.

"Hello, Jeff," he said. When he speaks he wheezes like an old-fashioned tire pump.

"Long time no see," I said. Evidently it was too much of an effort for him to comment on that, so he just waited for me to go on. I went straight to the heart of it. "Did you ever know a guy named Joe Tamarak?"

"Could be," he said.

"He's dead," I told him. "Shot in the back four times. It happened upstate yesterday. Probably didn't make the local papers."

"It didn't," The Mountain said.

"I was with him when he died," I said. "The last thing he did was mention your name."

"I should feel good about this?" The Mountain asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe you were his friend."

"Maybe."

Getting anything out of him was like bobbing for apples in a glue vat. I tried again. "He said he got involved in a big-time card game. He took in a sucker. The sucker took it over the fence with eight Gs. Joe couldn't find the sucker and he couldn't raise the eight Gs, so he got out of town. He was hiding out in a carnival, but they found him. When he was dying he mentioned your name. He also mentioned the name of the guy who runs the game."

"Oh," The Mountain said.

"Do you know a Lloyd Someone who runs a big card game?" I asked.

"No," The Mountain said.

"Why do you suppose Tamarak mentioned your name?" I asked.

"I don't like guessing games," The Mountain said.

I wasn't getting anywhere fast. "I think Joe figured you might know who killed him."

"I don't," The Mountain said. Then he really extended himself. "Why are you interested, Jeff?"

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"Joe was a nice little guy," I said. "If he was telling the truth he got a bad deal. I'd kind of like to check his story."

"And if it's on the level?"

"I don't know," I said. "You can't tell what you'll do in a situation till you know what the situation is."

The Mountain didn't say anything for a long time. Then he reached forward and wrote something on his pad. He tore off the slip of paper, folded it, and slid it across the table toward me. "I don't know anyone by the first name of Lloyd," he said.

I unfolded the paper. This is what he had written on it: *George Lloyd, proprietor and owner of The Circus Club.*

"Thanks," I said.

"Maybe I'm not doing you a favor," The Mountain remarked, and closed his eyes. He looked like he was asleep.

Yes, I was just curious and I had the time. There are people who will see an accident along the highway and say to themselves, "That's none of my business," and drive on. There are also people who will stop. I'm one of those. There was something about Joe Tamarak's story and his getting killed that didn't check. I had to stop to see what it was.

Professional gamblers and card players aren't usually killers. They'd be sore about losing that $8,000 and they'd try to get it back. But why kill Joe? A murder only meant possible trouble for the gamblers. So why? I kept asking myself.

I spent the rest of the day trying to run down a few old friends who might know something. That was pretty much a dead end street. None of them had ever heard of Joe Tamarak. I also asked questions about a big Argentine cattleman who might have looked like white meat to some of the sharp hustlers around town. Here my luck was a shade better, but only a shade. They had heard some under-the-table talk about such a guy, but nobody had ever seen him.

Of course I had another question. "Who is George Lloyd?" I asked everyone.

On this count I got plenty. It added up to this: George Lloyd was a very high-class card mechanic. As a front he ran a night spot called The Circus Club. He was a popular character in what is known as Café Society. The visiting movie stars and the local playboys thought of him as a big-time gambler, a sort of glorified Rothstein or Gates. The smart boys knew he was just a mechanic. He won because he knew how to deal cards and how to make dice work for him.

It still didn't add up. Eight thousand bucks wouldn't be much of a gouging for a guy working on Lloyd's level. Why risk a killing? Maybe the gambler's code calls for

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killing the welcher, but the mechanic, who isn't a gambler at all, is mainly concerned with keeping his skin whole and his racket going.

You couldn't get away from those four holes in Joe Tamarak's back, though. The guy who'd plugged him hadn't been taking a little quiet target practice. He'd meant it.

So it wasn't any of my business and I should have let it lie there. But me, I couldn't pass the accident without stopping. I had the time!

It was about eleven o'clock at night when I walked into The Circus Club. I didn't have any particular plans. I just thought I'd see what I could see and improvise.

The headwaiter gave me a table in a back corner of the room. The place was decorated with circus murals, to go with the name. The waiters wore clown suits and false noses. It was all terribly, terribly cute.

The place was full of people, but they didn't mean anything to me, and they didn't look like they'd get me any of the answers I was looking for. I decided to force my hand a little.

I signaled the headwaiter. "Is Mr. Lloyd around?" I asked.

"You wish to see him, sir?"

"That's the general idea."

"May I have your name, sir?"

"Lloyd doesn't know me," I said, "but it's quite important for me to have a chat with him."

"I'll see if he's in," the headwaiter said.

"Take a good look," I said, and slid a five-spot across the table. He smiled, and I figured his eyesight was already improved.

You understand, I just wanted to have a look at Lloyd. He was responsible for the accident, if Joe had been correct, and I wanted to size him up. In my business you learn to read character better than all the palmists, numerologists, and assorted fortunetellers rolled into one. I wanted to card-index Mr. George Lloyd and file him away in the back of my head for future reference. As to what we'd talk about—well, I'm a professional mechanic myself, and I could prove it. I'd use the line that I was looking for a place for myself. I could mention a few names that would do for references.

The majordomo came back after a spell. "This way, sir," he said.

He led me out past the washrooms to a hallway and pointed to a door at the end of it. "Mr. Lloyd's back there in his office," he said. "You can go right in."

I walked along the hall. There was a fire exit about halfway down on the left. When you've been in my racket you notice things like that. You never know when they may be valuable. I reached the door to the office, opened it, and went in.

It was a good-sized room. There was a thick green rug on the floor, white leather chairs, a big, flat-topped desk, a little bar on wheels alongside it, a modern safe, and

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hundreds of pictures of theatrical people, movie stars, and sports celebrities on the walls.

There was a guy standing behind the desk, pouring himself a drink out of a glass decanter. He was a short, dark guy with close-set black eyes and black hair that shimmered in the light from the desk lamp. I knew right away this wasn't George Lloyd. Lloyd had been described to me as a tall, blond type.

I knew something else about this guy. I'd seen him before. I have a photographic memory for faces, and I knew this guy and just where I'd seen him. It had been the night before, a hundred miles from here, on the carnival midway.

"What happened?" he said. "Did Tamarak talk before he died?"

It seemed this guy knew me, too.

It wasn't so odd when you came to think of it. This guy—and I had no doubts he was the one who'd killed Joe—had had to hang around the midway till he got the opportunity for killing with the best chance of a getaway. He'd stood in front of the Skill-O game and taken in the whole set-up. He remembered me as I remembered him.

Sometimes it's smart to act dumb, and sometimes it's a waste of time. I kept coming till I was standing directly across the desk from him. He put down the decanter and put the stopper back in the long, narrow neck. He lifted his glass.

"Well?" he said. "Did Tamarak talk?"

"With those four holes in him?"

The guy swallowed, then put the glass down. "You didn't get here by accident," he said.

"That's right." I was feeling my way.

"I could have taken a powder when the waiter pointed you out to me," he said. "But I figured if you'd got this far you'd keep on hanging around. I work here, you know. I couldn't stay under cover forever. I figured we might as well get it over with."

"Get what over with?"

"Don't act stupid," he said.

I've learned to watch hands and eyes. This guy's eyes were angry and his hands were relaxed—the kind of relaxation that you see just before action.

"How easy is it to get rid of a corpse in this city?" I asked.

"Easy," he said. "Don't count on that."

"We can't make a deal?"

"How?" he asked.

It wasn't easy to figure. He knew that I knew he was a murderer. I could point him out to the cops. There'd probably be others who'd remember seeing him, once he was on the spot. He had the odds figured, and they were too long.

"You see how it is," he said, and reached for the gun in his shoulder holster.

You don't want to get the idea from Western movies that when a man draws a gun it's so fast the gun just materializes in his hand. Espe-

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cially when he draws it from inside a double-breasted suit.

Moving fast has been my livelihood for fifty years. While he was tugging for that gun my hand closed over the neck of the heavy glass decanter. I hit him with it right between the eyes.

He staggered back against the wall. He had the gun out, but he moved it around toward me like a slow-motion picture. I stepped past the desk and made a pass at the gun with my left hand. I missed, and he raised it up, straight at me. There wasn't anything I could do but hit him with the decanter again, hard. The gun dropped out of his fingers and landed soundlessly on the rug. He slid slowly down the wall and then rolled over on his face. I saw what the decanter had done to the side of his head and I felt a little sick.

For the first time in my life my reflexes didn't work. You see, I'd never killed a guy before. I knew he was dead, without feeling for any pulse. It's funny what you think about in a moment like that. I thought, "I don't even know what his name is!"

I remember I reached out and put the decanter down on the desk, fumblingly, so that I knocked over the glass with the rest of his drink in it. I looked down at my right hand, opening and closing the fingers, as if I wanted to make sure it was my hand, attached to my arm.

Words kept going round and round in my head. "He's killed Joe . . . He had it coming to him . . . Anyway, it was self-defense . . . It was him or me."

I was still staring at the body on the floor when I realized I wasn't alone.

If I'd seen a football team of waiters blocking my way, I wouldn't have been surprised. If it had been Lloyd, I wouldn't have done a take. If it had been anyone but the girl who stood with her back against the door, a bright red cape falling partway off her bare shoulders, and a tiny gun leveled straight at me, I wouldn't have felt the sense of shock I did.

She had dark hair that hung loosely down to her shoulders. The dress under that cape was one of those strapless things that have always been a mystery to me how they stay up. She wore expensive jewelry—a bracelet, earrings, and something set in diamonds that hung on a chain around her neck.

I noticed these things, but they weren't what held me. It was her eyes, wide-set, a kind of deep, burning blue. They weren't angry. They weren't frightened. I don't know any other way to describe them except to say that they literally sparkled with excitement.

"Is he dead?" she asked. Her voice was husky, breathless, as though my answer was the most important thing in the world to her.

I didn't like the way the situation

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felt. There was the threat of something explosive about that pent-up excitement.

"I don't think there's much doubt of it," I said.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

"If you'll move around the desk you'll see the gun he was going to use on me."

She didn't move. "Why was he going to shoot you?"

"Look," I said, "could I ask a question?"

"What?"

"Who is he?"

I wished I hadn't asked it. You could almost feel the wave of excitement sweep over her. "You don't know who he is?"

"No," I said. "Look, you've got three things you can do, miss. You can shoot me, if this guy meant something to you and that's the way you feel—"

"Go on."

"You can call for help and let someone else handle the situation. Or you can let me go."

She didn't say anything for a moment. The tip of her tongue moistened her scarlet lips. "If you didn't know him," she said finally, "then why did he want to shoot you?"

"Maybe it was just a whim."

An unexpectedly hard light came into her eyes. "I want a straight answer," she said. "Were you trying to rob the place?"

"No," I said.

"Then what happened?"

Perhaps I don't have to draw a blueprint of why I wasn't going to tell her the truth just then. I didn't know what she was doing in Lloyd's office, but it suggested she had the run of the place. That meant she was a friend of the management. She probably knew the dead man quite well, since he'd said he worked here. I wasn't going to tell her he'd intended to kill me because I knew he was a murderer. She might want me out of the way, too.

"I think," I said slowly, "he made a mistake. I think he thought I was someone else. There wasn't any time to argue with him. He started to draw the gun and I hit him with that decanter. I didn't mean to kill him. I was just trying to save myself, that's all."

She reached up with her free hand and pulled the cape around her shoulders. Then she moved away from the door. "I think you'd better put up your hands," she said. "Up high! You're a little too quick for comfort. Now!"

I lifted my hands up over my head. She reached out and opened the door.

"All right," she said. "Quickly. Down the hall—and keep your hands up."

The pressure of her finger on the trigger was too tight for me to disobey. I went out into the hall.

"Hurry," the girl said, behind me. I started walking. Then, to my surprise, she said, "Out that door to the right."

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The door to the right was the fire exit. I was suddenly out in the cool darkness of an alley. The heavy fire door closed, and the girl spoke again.

"I don't think anyone saw us," she said. "You can put your hands down, but keep walking."

"What's the idea?" I asked.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "If anyone had seen us I didn't want it to look as though I was helping you."

I kept walking toward the street. "Are you helping me?"

"I don't know yet," she said. "Listen carefully. We're coming out at the rear of the building. There's a blue convertible parked across the way. Can you drive?"

"Yes."

"Good. You get in behind the wheel. I'll sit beside you and I'm going to have this gun right against your ribs, so do exactly as I tell you."

"Yes, *ma'am!*" I said.

The car was a custom-built job that must have set her, or somebody, back about nine thousand clams. I got in behind the wheel, and she sat down beside me. For the first time I got a whiff of the perfume she was using. It would have been heady stuff for me twenty years ago—What am I saying? It was heady stuff right then.

"Make for Central Park," she said.

She didn't say anything more until we turned into the park at Fifty-ninth Street. "What's your name?" she asked me.

"Joe Sucker," I said. "Believe it or not, I was just waiting for a street car, minding my own business—"

"I want your real name," she said, with a touch of that hardness I'd noticed before.

"Jeff Larigan," I said. I'd done some figuring, and I'd decided to take that one gamble—for a reason. The dead guy had recognized me as the operator of the Skill-O game in the carnival. But it was ten to one he hadn't made any inquiries about me. No reason why he should. I figured he'd just recognized me, the way I'd recognized him.

Anyway, I had to risk giving my right name, because I'd decided what my story was going to be. I was going to stick to my original idea—that I'd gone to see Lloyd in the hope that he could find work for me as a professional card- and diceman. I'd give my right name because they'd have ways of checking, and they'd discover that I was what I said I was. There weren't five people who knew I'd been working in the carnival, and they were the kind of friends who didn't talk for the pleasure of hearing their own voices. I had to have a legitimate explanation for being at The Circus Club and asking for Lloyd. This seemed the best one, and if this girl was connected with Lloyd, it was the best one for her.

"Jeff Larigan," she said, trying to

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remember if she'd ever heard the name before. "What were you doing at The Circus Club, Jeff?"

"This sounds so improbable," I said, "you won't believe it. I went there to see George Lloyd, the proprietor. The headwaiter told me he was in his office and that it was all right for me to go in. I did. Instead of Lloyd I found this other guy. He pulled a gun on me and I hit him with the decanter."

"Fill in the gap," she said.

"What gap?"

"Didn't Buddy say anything to you?"

"Who's Buddy?"

"Buddy Lamar, the man you killed. Are you trying to tell me he just pulled a gun on you without a word?"

"That's the way it was," I said. So the guy's name was Lamar. I'd never heard it before.

"Why did you want to see Mr. Lloyd?" the girl asked.

"Lady, that gun gives you the right to ask an awful lot of questions," I hedged.

"I've given you a chance, haven't I?" she said. "I'm entitled to know about you so I can decide what to do next."

That, I thought, wasn't unreasonable. "All right, I'll let you have it straight," I said. "Incidentally, it would be handy if I could call you something."

"My name is Judith Hagan."

That didn't mean anything to me, either. "Well, Judith, this is the way it is." I told her my story about looking for work.

"And you never saw Buddy Lamar before?"

"No," I said.

"Turn out of the park at the next exit," she said.

I felt my muscles tighten. "What's on the program?"

"We're going to my apartment, where we can talk quietly," she said. "Who were the friends who recommended Lloyd to you?"

"You wouldn't know them," I said.

"Try me."

"Ever hear of The Mountain?"

She burst out laughing. It was a charming sound. "That fat swindler!" she said.

"You know him?"

"Know him! He's been averaging plenty a week on me."

"Horses?" I asked.

"That's what it says in the racing form," she said. "Turn here, Jeff, and then east on Seventy-sixth."

I drove out of the park, turned north on Fifth Avenue, then east on Seventy-sixth. A few doors in she indicated an apartment building with a canopy out over the sidewalk. The pressure of the gun relaxed.

Maybe you'll think I should have made a break then, but there was a doorman, a big guy, who was all smiles for Judith Hagan. Besides, I was curious, and there were a lot of things I wanted to know about

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Lloyd and Lamar that maybe Judith could fill in for me.

The doorman took charge of the blue buggy, and I went upstairs with Judith. The apartment wasn't a surprise, nor the maid in the white apron and cap who appeared as soon as Judith had let us in with a latchkey. The car, the jewels, the talk about losing to The Mountain spelled dough, and in freightcar loads.

The elevator opened into a private foyer. Judith spoke to the maid in French, and then took me down a hall to a room which turned out to be a sort of private pub.

There was a complete bar, tables and chairs, couches along the oak-paneled walls, some sort of glass trophy case at one end, and almost as many pictures as there'd been in Lloyd's office. The only difference was that these were all pictures of Judith, or had Judith in them.

She took off her gloves and went around behind the bar. "What'll you have, Jeff?"

"I don't drink," I said. "A little sparkling water, maybe."

"You don't drink?" She sounded surprised.

"Or smoke," I said. "In my business you need all your senses sharp."

She poured me some soda and a liqueur glass of brandy for herself and came out front to join me. I'd moved over to the wall.

"Quite a collection of pictures," I said. They were. Judith on skis; Judith at the wheel of a speedboat; Judith in a racing car; Judith at the controls of a Piper Cub; Judith in the uniform of an Air Force Ferry pilot; Judith taking a horse over a murderous water jump. "You don't seem to have left out any ways for breaking your neck," I said.

"It's still unbroken," she said. Then I noticed the one picture in which Judith wasn't doing anything dangerous. It was a picture of a man in old pants and a sloppy hat holding up a swordfish that was bigger than he was. Beside him was a little girl in pigtails whom I recognized as Judith. I kept staring at the picture because the man was familiar, but I couldn't place him.

"Who's the man with the fish?" I asked Judith.

She didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, "My father."

"Oh," I said. Hagan. It didn't click. I couldn't place him.

"Don't you think, Jeff, you'd better start doing some thinking?" Judith said. "By now it's likely the whole city police force is looking for you. What are you going to do?"

We sat down at one of the tables. The crimson cape slid back off her shoulders. I thought she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. That almost crazy excitement had faded out of her eyes.

"How did you happen to turn up in Lloyd's office when you did?" I asked her.

"I wanted George to cash a check for me," she said.

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"Do you always carry a gun?"

"Oh, yes," she said, quite casually. "I have a permit for it, if that's what's bothering you." She held out her hand, and the bracelet and a couple of rings glittered in the dim light. "These are real, Jeff. I get pleasure from wearing them. And I go about a great deal by myself. They seem worth protecting."

She leaned forward. "You've just killed a man. The police will be looking for you. Maybe some of Buddy's friends will be looking for you. What are you going to do?"

"Well, up to now I haven't had any say in the matter. What do you know about Lamar?"

She shrugged. "He was a sort of handyman for George Lloyd," she said. "Bodyguard, errand boy—he just sort of hangs around. Or did."

"Do you know Lloyd well?" I asked.

"In a sort of way. I've played a lot of cards with him."

I raised my eyebrows. "That's not very smart, is it? You know he's a mechanic?"

She laughed. "Haven't you guessed by now what my weakness is, Jeff? It's running risks. Anything that has an element of risk in it is my dish. I know about Lloyd, and he knows that I know. But I like to sit in on the games because—well, there's always a chance there'll be an explosion."

I opened my mouth to ask her a question, and then shut it tight. I'd been about to ask her if she'd happened to sit in on a game with a certain Argentine cattleman. I wasn't sure enough of her for that yet.

She glanced at her jeweled wrist watch. "There's a news broadcast on the hour," she said. "Maybe the story's broken."

She went over and turned on a radio back of the bar. There were three minutes of news, but nothing about The Circus Club or Buddy Lamar. She clicked off the radio and came back to the table.

"Perhaps you'd better go to the police," she said. "If you didn't know Buddy—if there's nothing between you two that they can dig up—" It was really another feeler she was putting out.

"I tell you I didn't know him. I never had any dealings with him," I said. Which was true.

Just then a telephone bell rang. Judith went behind the bar and answered it.

"George!" she said. She put her hand over the mouthpiece, and her eyes were round and bright again. "George Lloyd!" she whispered to me. Then she went on in her normal voice, "Yes—yes, I'm quite all right, George . . . No! But, George, how terrible! . . . But why?"

I could hear the scratching sound of Lloyd's voice through the receiver, but not what he was saying.

Then Judith spoke again. "Carlo must be wrong, George. There wasn't anyone in the office when I went there. It must have been *before* . . .

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Of course I'm sure. I'd have seen him, wouldn't I? . . . It's a terrible thing for you. Will it hurt the club? . . . I see. Well, I'm terribly grateful to you for calling . . . No, when you weren't in the office I just went out through the alley to my car and came home . . . Yes. Good night, George. And let me know what happens."

She put down the receiver slowly. She looked at me, and her eyes had that dark, excited look in them.

"They've found Lamar," I said.

"Yes. They found him and called the police. And Carlo, the head-waiter, described you. They're looking for you. The police, that is."

"Of course. That was inevitable," I said.

"Jeff, there wasn't any gun."

"What do you mean?"

"They say Buddy was unarmed."

"Nuts," I said. "There was a gun right where he dropped it on the rug. And he was wearing a shoulder harness."

"Not when they found him, Jeff. They think you were going to rob the office. They think Buddy caught you at it and you killed him. They say he wasn't armed, so the self-defense story won't hold up."

(continued on page 69)

COMING ATTRACTIONS . . .

Watch for *NEW* stories by

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***The Seeds of Murder***

DETECTIVES: Stuff Driscoll and Smallpox Harry

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Meet the temperamental Natakova family of international ballet fame — and observe what happens after the seeds of murder have been planted — in concrete!*

THE CONCRETE WAS POURED IN the afternoon, then tamped and leveled by two Negroes with their satin torsos seal-wet under a Florida September sun. The rectangular surface measuring ten by twenty feet was smoothed to an unbroken platform of glossy gray and the simple operation was ended around half-past four.

All beneath the imperialistic, tarpon-eyed supervision of Mikhail Natakova.

Concerning the Natakovas. While not considered hopelessly bizarre among the staider residents of the Gold Coast township of Halcyon, Florida, they were accepted as being harmlessly cracked in a temperamental manner. Harmless, that is, until after Mikhail had irritatingly bossed the concrete pouring job for his proposed private patio, and had then been conclusively shot at contact range with a .22 caliber bullet through the back of his head.

During the period of the murder, M. Serge Natakova, founder of the troupe, had already been out of the picture for seven years. He had succumbed to an attack of pleural pneumonia down in Buenos Aires where his company had folded after a dismal short season of *ballets d'action* and "Danses Classiques Russes" at the Teatro Colon.

The curtain for that unhappy tour had lowered on a gently creak-

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ing performance of the "Dying Swan" with Serge's sister Lydia (she was then touching her unadmitted fifties) as prima ballerina. Lydia's execution of the Pavlova classic had impressed the Argentine balletomanes as being considerably less than *assoluta*, and what with the convenience of her brother being taken fatally ill she had cancelled upcoming performances of a *pas de deux* Bacchanale, plus a Fokine arrangement of "Les Sylphides" and a Lifar job on "Giselle."

Lydia had then disbanded the troupe, buried her brother with economical pomp, packed up his daughter and two sons, settled their bills at the well-groomed Alvear Palace Hotel, and set sail home for the United States draped in demi-mourning.

Regardless of the unprofitable short run at the Teatro Colon, this leftover cluster of the Natakova family was by no means broke. During the years succeeding his and Lydia's nightmare flight from Russia back in 1915, Serge had salted away a considerable fortune. The loot had been and still was invested in Florida, the eastern seaboard of which both he and Lydia had favored for a permanent home, following their naturalization as American citizens.

Soon after this early settling in Halcyon, which occupies a pleasant toehold between Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Serge had met and married Polly Severance, a rich and mildly alcoholic Florida divorcée who had been knocked silly by Serge's superb leaps. She had given him his first son, Mikhail, back in 1923—today, the corpse—one might even say facetiously, the corpse de ballet.

Two years later a second son, Nicholas, had been born, and then, after a lapse of eight years, a daughter Irina. This last blessed event coupled with a backlog of vodka and leaps had proved to be too much, and Polly had passed on to her final and needed rest.

Pursuant to Serge's pneumonic death seven years ago in Buenos Aires, his will had disclosed that the income from the entire Natakova estate was left in trust to the elder son, Mikhail. Further clauses directed that during his lifetime Mikhail would have sole control of the disbursement of all monies.

Upon Mikhail's death, the trust was to be dissolved and the estate divided equally among the aging Lydia, her nephew Nicholas, and her young niece Irina—to be inevitably scattered, as the will had worded it, to the delirious winds. Such, of course, are the well-known seeds that so often germinate into murder.

A gratuitously additional clause had explained Serge's selection of Mikhail as maestro of the cash.

"My sister Lydia," Serge posthumously told his survivors, "is alternately in a feverish blitz or drunk with morbid despair and

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therefore unfit to control wealth. She would dissipate the entire capital in some harebrained tour of the States or Europe with herself billed as prima ballerina, a position for which she is even now too old, and anyhow she is a revolting devourer of Turkish Paste.

"My younger son, Nicholas, is a gambling maniac and by no means to be trusted as guardian of the family finances. Over a long period of years I have noted his trancelike selection of race horses which monotonously come in fourth. Furthermore, he has an incurable habit of drawing to inside straights."

The old gentleman softened up a bit in the next paragraph, leaving no doubt as to his favorite.

"My dear and well-beloved daughter Irina is of a heart so melting and so big that she would give and give and give to any human vulture who might shed a human vulture's tear and thus bring the moisture of pity into her deep cerulean-blue eyes. In two shakes of one lamb's tail the Natakova fortune would vanish.

"Which is why I have appointed my older son, Mikhail, with his sound head for business affairs, as manager complete. Under the spreading pinions of his cast-iron wings my dear ones may perhaps not feast on pheasant stuffed with plover birds, but I shall expire in the assurance that on a diet of inexpensive and nutritious mutton they shall not starve. . . ."

Stuff Driscoll, the trained, the courteous, the honey-tongued, the University Club modern type of criminal investigator for the sheriff's office (Stuff wouldn't have been caught dead with an ironed crease in the sleeves of his jacket or with the mannered rim of a handkerchief exposed from his breast pocket) accepted a small brandy and sank back with illusory ease into a wicker lounge-chair on the Natakova terrace.

Fragrance of night-blooming jasmine drifted in on the trades. A full moon filtered mock daylight down through langorous palm fronds, while an as yet supperless mosquito landed on Stuff's instep.

"Tell me," he said, slapping, to Lydia, "about your niece Irina and young Douglas Farning."

Lydia Natakova, by now moved up to the fringe of her unadmitted sixties, floated a yard-square kerchief of violet chiffon in a gesture reminiscent of its balletic counterpart in "Baiser de la Fée." Her figure remained superbly intact despite her absorption in and of the sticky, almond-spotted confection called Turkish Paste—57 calories a bite whereas her features and hair styling continued to be arresting in a theatrical fashion.

Regardless of her present moorage in Halcyon, the endless tours and sojourns in foreign lands had jumbled her thought and oral mannerisms into a polyglot of tongues. On the expiration of a contralto

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sigh she asked, "Ah, how can one *tell* about love? About," she added, to make the impossibility stronger, *"l'amour?"*

"True, we can only take it for granted," Stuff agreed diplomatically.

"It is an effect, a disease, a calamitous bonbon dipped in heaven and in hell."

All of which absurdities Stuff conceded before he remarked, "I believe your nephew Mikhail was not in favor of the match?"

"Mikhail," Lydia admitted generously, "had as much romance in his negligible soul as that enjoyed by a zinc-lined stoat. It was his nature to play the tyrant. It was his decree that Irina make a notable alliance with the bulging son of those 'Grandma's Biscuits' people down the beach."

"That would be Hartington Bryce, Junior?"

"Yes. A flower. The boy is even absenter than we are. It would be appropriate for him to wear a For Rent sign pasted on his head. Vacant."

Stuff veered off into a brief detour. "How does it happen, Miss Natakova, that none of Serge's children followed the family tradition by taking up ballet?"

"Because tragically the pure blood of the Natakovas was mixed in them, Mr. Driscoll, with the blood of their mother. Her conception of the dance embraced a pigmy bracket between the Charleston and a hoola-hoop version of the Cha Cha."

"But surely under your brother's and your own expert tutelage?"

"Of a certainty we both did our best. In vain. With Nicholas, of course, the loss of his left leg in that miserable car crash ten years ago spelled finish as far as he was concerned."

"Incidentally, with all the mechanical improvements that have come into effect in the past ten years, why does he wear an old-fashioned pegleg? There are types of artificial legs now that are practically unnoticeable."

"Because he is Nicholas. He prefers to flaunt his disability openly before the world." Then Lydia added in a tone of voice which implied that nothing could be done about it, "It is his nature."

"About Mikhail and Miss Irina, was there no inherited talent?"

"With Mikhail, absolutely none. His *métier* lay strictly in the world of business. For a while we had hopes for Irina, but it was no use —her ineptitude in basic technique, in the *danse d'ecole*, was a bitter pill for dear Serge to swallow. The pill became even bitterer when a year or so before his death she took up puppets."

Stuff abandoned the detour and said, "I am familiar with the terms of your late brother Serge's will appointing Mikhail as executor. Apart from the money angle, what possible control did Mikhail have over his sister? Miss Irina is now twenty-

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five and accustomed, as I understand, to living economically. And young Farning is certainly not penniless?"

Lydia pierced Stuff with a lance-tipped look and said as though the statement were irrefutable, "Terror, Mr. Driscoll."

"Of Mikhail?" His smile had a polite oh-come-now look.

"Of what he might have done to Douglas Farning. Irina's love for the boy was a disobedience to Mikhail's wishes, even though it is a love that excludes the world while creating one of its own. Does that mean anything to you?"

"In an abstract sense, yes."

"Myself, I know because I remember. As a young girl back in Russia my own loved one died. They said it was from exposure to the cold. Perhaps. But not to the colds of ice and snow."

After a suitably brief interval of respect for the frozen remembrance, Stuff asked, "Just what might Mikhail have done, Miss Nataková?"

"He would have killed the boy at the wedding altar. He would have killed them both, either indoors or out, before they could murmur 'I Do.'" Lydia lifted a grateful glance toward an invisible gallery. "Ah, what a comfort it is to realize that Mikhail is now securely at peace!"

"Did he threaten these actions verbally?"

"He did so in the very office on Halcyon Boulevard where Douglas Farning conducts his modest real estate business. Before six people."

"What was Farning's reaction?"

"Ah, that brave one! Formidably he seized Mikhail by the seat of his improbable Bermuda shorts and cast him out—a *jeu de théâtre magnifique!*"

"Wasn't Mikhail just 'talking'?"

Lydia again slipped backward into the childhood days of herself and Serge within the cold fastnesses of empire that had then been Russia. "Are you familiar with the greyhound, Mr. Driscoll?"

"Only at a distance. At the dog tracks, yes, mostly to my sorrow."

"Well, in the days of Czarist Russia when one owned such a dog the mastership was absolute—of the animal's allegiance, of his unquestioning obedience and love. When by some stupid chance the greyhound transferred any one of such attributes to a human other than the master, the dog was shot. That is both a fact and an allegory. The behavior patterns of generations are not erased by a removal to another land. No, it is possible that as imperial head of our household Mikhail could have meant exactly what he said."

Perhaps, Stuff wondered, translating Irina allegorically into a greyhound, there might be something in the contention—even in this day and age when the Russian Czars were now relegated from their high omnipotence down to a clichéd word in crossword puzzles.

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Perhaps in a family such as the Natakovas, who were held by the community to be fairly off their rockers, Mikhail's threat could have indicated a motive? A perverted form of premature self-defense with young Douglas holding the gun? To protect not only himself but his love, Irina?

Lydia loosed another shaftlike look. "Mr. Driscoll, why do you expose this interest in Douglas and Irina when our Chief of Police Mr. Davis already has arrested my nephew Nicholas for the crime?"

"Your nephew Nicholas, Miss Natakova, has simply been taken to headquarters by Chief Davis for questioning."

"A *bavardage* of utter nonsense! Is it not the same thing?"

"No."

"And are there not the footprints? Proof in the veritable concrete that it was Nicholas who made them with his wooden pegleg? That he was the just executioner of Mikhail?"

"We do not like to overlook things," Stuff said. "Anything."

"But what is there to overlook? Our manservant Herrick hears a shot as he passes the study door. He enters and beholds Mikhail's extinct condition. The room otherwise is empty, with the murderer having fled across the concrete during that minute while Herrick hesitates before entering. He summons the police."

"Did you also," Stuff interjected, "hear the shot, Miss Natakova?"

"Impossible. The room where I keep up my practice in technique is far removed from the one where the shot was fired."

"Do you practice to music?"

"At the moment I was employing the 'Bolero' of Ravel."

A hearty enough piece, Stuff conceded, to deaden with its tympany the noise of a .22 caliber gun.

"So what have we then?" Lydia asked, promptly preventing, with an imperious gesture, Stuff's effort to tell her. "Mr. Davis and his minions arrive. He discovers the concrete of the patio base still yielding to the touch and beholds on it the pegleg footprints going away from the jalousie door. And no other footprints exist. Ah, no, my friend, it is Nicholas and only Nicholas who sped the gracious bullet on its course. Who else?"

"Well, for an example, Miss Natakova, we must consider that young Douglas Farning severely sprained his left ankle at tennis several days ago and the additional provocative fact that he now favors the ankle by using a crutch."

Stuff drove his department cruiser toward the Everglades, shortly reaching a village of the Miccosukee tribe where he found Smallpox Harry stretched on his washboard stomach under a willow "promising tree" reading a book by lantern light.

"How!" Stuff said through a

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solid whirring gauze of winged nightlife.

"How yourself," Smallpox agreed. "Say, listen, Stuff, get a load of this—*I know that age to age succeeds, blowing a noise of tongues and deeds, a dust of systems and of creeds.*"

"Tennyson?"

"The man Alfred himself. Makes us puny frets look silly, doesn't it? Us Reds, you Whites, our Yellow brothers, and the Blacks. When you take the long point of view."

"Very long, Smallpox. Overlong."

"What's on your mind? An escapee from your escape-proof jail? Some poor slob now dodging alligators in our swampy suburban paradise?"

"No, it's a killing. Footprints. Tracks will be the answer to it."

"Here in the Everglades?"

"In Halcyon."

"Well, why me? What's happened to your crime lab?"

"It's a question of time. You know the lab boys—good guys but they crawl along by micrometer. I'd like to get your opinion on the tracks before Chief Davis sticks his neck out too far. Tonight, if you'll come back with me. I think he may be getting set to arrest the wrong man."

"Sure I'll go back with you. What's the script?"

Stuff sketched in the Natakova background and then the particulars of the crime itself.

The concrete job had been smoothed and finished by four thirty. Thereupon Mikhail had retired to his combination study-and-Florida room, both to work on a land development scheme that he was considering and to keep an eye through the room's glass jalousies on his new patio until the fresh concrete should set—unmarred by any imbecile stepper-on-it or finger-poker. Both were unlikely events due to the extent, tropical plantings, and general privacy of the Natakova grounds; but Mikhail was not a man to take any chances.

Around six thirty, when dusk was falling and the concrete was firming but was still yielding enough to take clear impressions under pressure, Nicholas had gone into his brother's study and plunged into a passionate argument about having his allowance from Mikhail increased.

All these things Nicholas had freely admitted to Chief Davis.

The allowance argument was an old one and this time Mikhail not only flatly refused but even went a step further—he reduced the amount already being doled out. In a raging fit of revengefulness Nicholas left the study by a jalousie door and stamped out onto the new concrete—leaving a clear track of peg-leg holes and right footprints across the patio while Mikhail screamed and threatened to kill him. Mikhail even got a gun (believed to be the murder weapon) from his desk and

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waved it at his brother just as Nicholas, having crossed the concrete, safely dodged behind a clump of bougainvillaea.

Nicholas told Chief Davis that he had then taken his car and had gone for a completely alibiless drive out through the boondocks.

The next act opened apparently ten or fifteen minutes after Nicholas's self-proclaimed departure—when the manservant Herrick passed the door of the study and heard a shot fired behind it.

"Evidently," Stuff said, "this struck him as an unusual sound effect even in a household as wacky as the Natakova's. Herrick stood by the door for a minute before he decided to knock. When he got no answer, he opened the door and found Mikhail sprawled out dead with his .22 caliber target gun on the floor beside him."

"No suicide angle?"

"Not even by a contortionist. The gun was held against the back of the skull down at the base and directly center. The point is, Smallpox, that between the sound of the shot and Herrick's opening of the door nobody could have left the room by that door without passing straight through him."

"And naturally the room was empty except for the corpse?"

"Yes. Herrick used the phone on Mikhail's desk to call the police and stayed right on in the room until Chief Davis and the boys got there. Davis had told him to see that nothing was touched, and Herrick took it as a personal responsibility. He didn't even leave to look up Miss Lydia or Miss Irina to tell them that Mikhail was dead."

"Which gives you Brother Nicholas and his pegleg tracks—and no more."

"Just so. Davis tested the concrete just as soon as he got there and it was still soft enough to take a good impression. Not a soul could have walked across it between the shot and Herrick's watchdog act without leaving marks."

"Why not have stepped in Nicholas' footprints—but I forgot—the pegleg holes. Possibly it was a Disneyland-inspired acrobat who used a pogo stick."

"Or," Stuff said, "a crutch. Trouble is, Miss Irina's boy friend who does use one has the same sort of useless alibi that Nicholas has. Told Davis he drove down to Coral Gables to see a client about the sale of a house. The client was out and nobody else was at home to confirm that he had been there. If you're ready, Smallpox, let's go."

The house, with the precision of Caesar's Gaul, was divided into three parts.

Nicholas, returned from his session with the Chief of Police at headquarters, had immediately dismissed the whole tiresome episode about Mikhail from his active thoughts. They—the thoughts—were now engaged in a trancelike

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preoccupation with long shots in tomorrow's cards at the northern racetracks.

He paced the living room of his suite with a dope sheet clutched in one hand, with his pegleg tapping out a march of triumph on terrazzo flooring and the powerful calf of his right leg hairy beneath lime-colored Bermuda shorts. He presented, with no audience to view it, a modern portrait of a pirate from the Spanish Main whose meagerly stocked treasure chest was shortly to be filled with loot—as soon as the legal formalities were concluded.

He was a happy man.

In a farther part of the house Lydia, too, was feverishly occupied with pacing the living room of her suite. The walls of her apartment were generously hung with framed photographs of the more famous dancers, all autographed to Lydia in varying degrees of affection.

Most of the flat surfaces in the chamber were littered with sketches of stage décor, numerous synopses of choreographical drafts, and her own voluminous notes—all for the purpose of helping to make up her mind as to which ballet she should use as an opener for a contemplated tour of the continent—now that a fat slice of the Natakova fortune would soon be in her restless hands.

Her mind was torn between the choice of "Coppelia" or "The Legend of Azyade," and aside from this problem, which was driving her crazy, she was a very happy woman.

Part Three of the house was a loggia opening onto the terrace where Stuff and Lydia had sat chatting earlier in the evening. At present it was occupied by Irina and Douglas Farning—she, a handsome young woman with (a unique rarity in Florida) naturally golden hair, and he, a stalwart young gentleman from Georgia.

Both were temporarily blind as bats to the homicidal past and the possible—because of Doug's crutch—accusative future. Only the present moment concerned them—this private paradise that fenced their love.

In the rear of the house, on the now hardened concrete patio outside the late Mikhail's study, Smallpox Harry with the aid of a powerful flashlight studied the tracks that had admittedly been made by Nicholas. His vision was remarkable even for an Indian, and considerable practice had further enhanced his inherited ability in the art.

After an almost cursory inspection of the prints embedded by the right shoe, Smallpox turned an intensive interest on the holes that had been made by the wooden pegleg. He bypassed none of them but knelt by each, lingering over them with an absorbed and puzzled concentration.

Off to one side of the patio, Stuff speculated with Chief Davis on the current situation of the case. Davis told him the bullet had been extracted from Mikhail's head and

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that ballistically it compared perfectly with a test shot fired from the .22 caliber gun, a target pistol, found near the body.

As to the various alibis. Young Farning's trip to Coral Gables to see a man about a house remained unconfirmed, as did Nicholas's cooling-off drive through the boondocks following his howling set-to with his brother.

Lydia's practice session in her suite to the swelling drums of the "Bolero" while the shot into her nephew's head was fired had also laid an unprovable egg. And as for Irina, she had spent the late afternoon swimming and then reading the *Oxford Book of English Verse* at one of the cabanas on the Natakova private beach. She had not returned to the house until well after her brother had been shot.

"Unconfirmed, of course?" Stuff smiled.

"Entirely so," Davis said. "And as far as motives go, every one of them has the good old standby of murder for profit—a healthy chunk of the Natakova dough."

"Surely we can exclude young Farning on that angle?"

"Why? It adds up to instead of his marrying a charming but incomeless young lady he will now marry a ditto rich heiress."

"Nothing doing," Stuff said. "I don't believe that, and neither do you."

"Of course I don't, but erase the profit motive in the kid's case and then what have we? He surely hated Mikhail's guts for opposing his engagement to Irina, and for publicly vilifying him in his own office. He has no provable alibi, and he does use a crutch. Furthermore, he's a local tennis champ and athletic enough to have stepped in Nicholas' tracks with his right foot and in the pegleg holes with his crutch."

It was on this dreary outlook for the teetering fate of young love that Smallpox joined them.

"What's the verdict?" Stuff asked him.

"The concrete is about ten feet across and there are four shoeprints. Nobody walked in them after they were made. Nothing has been superimposed."

"The pegleg holes?"

"Not so simple, Stuff. There are four of those, too—spaced about two feet apart. I imagine brother Nicholas took shorter steps than usual to prolong Brother Mike's agony and screaming. Anyhow, the top edges of the indentations are naturally blurred by the drag effect of the pegleg in the hardening concrete, but the bottoms of the holes are readable—and something *has* been superimposed there."

"A crutch?"

"No." Smallpox was as curiously perplexed as the two men were when he spoke. "The thing I'd look for, Stuff, is a bit of cloth."

A general roundup took place

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half an hour later in the Florida room-and-study. Irina and Douglas Farning sat with the strained formality of young-lovers-on-display, and on, symbolically, a love seat. Lydia had preempted the chair behind Mikhail's desk—she occupied it in an almost consciously regal manner now that the shackles of her purse-clutching nephew no longer had a stranglehold on her own plans and ambitions.

Nicholas lay flat on his back in piratical ease on a bamboo chaise-lounge mentally calculating the odds at Belmont, while Chief Davis and Smallpox stood casually alert near the jalousie doors of the patio. The shot-hearing Herrick stood with professional dignity beside a potted palm.

The gathering had not been arranged by Stuff for the somewhat conventional dramatic tenterhook summation, where the law's protagonist points the finger of denunciation first at one and then at another of the perspiring suspects, saving the true suspect until the last in order to frazzle his nerves.

Its purpose was more practical than that. After Smallpox's bewildering verdict on the tracks (it was by now no longer bewildering to Stuff—nor to Davis or Smallpox after Stuff had explained his theory), Stuff had simply wanted to search the household's rooms at once, and the easiest way to accomplish it had been to herd the lot into the study.

They had been sitting there long enough for impatience to begin its fraying action when Stuff joined them.

He carried a brown paper bag, evidently masking some object or objects whose exact nature was of course unrecognizable. The group was promptly as fascinated by it as children during the magician's act at a birthday party.

Stuff wasted no time. He nodded to Davis and Smallpox, and Davis moved several steps closer to the murderer.

"You all have a financial interest in this," Stuff said, "because under the law a murderer cannot inherit from his victim."

One set of eyes shone brighter with the pleasure of greed.

"This," Stuff went on, "has been a curious crime in the sense that I believe there has been premeditation of intent, but no premeditation of time or method. There isn't one of you who hasn't at some time or another wanted to kill Mikhail Natakova, the basic motive being money—freedom from the tyrannical hold he had over your allowances."

"How true!" boomed Nicholas heartily.

"How true!" cried Lydia with a more contralto heartiness.

Irina and Douglas said nothing, nor did Herrick who was *not*, incidentally, a Russian nobleman disguised as a manservant (as Smallpox had helpfully suggested) to

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save his old mother still behind the Iron Curtain.

"If the opportunity and the weapon had presented themselves during any of those earlier moments," Stuff said, "they would have been seized. Well, this evening the opportunity and the weapon *were* presented and *were* seized. Furthermore, the opportunity was of such a nature that the killer would be safe—because the blame for the act would be placed on someone else."

Stuff put the paper bag on the desk before Lydia. Tentatively she reached out to touch it but then, with an air of imperious indifference, withdrew her hand.

"The quarrel," Stuff said, "between Nicholas and his brother was violent and loud enough to be heard above the slow, muted opening of the 'Bolero'—before its later crescendoes. You left your room and went to your nephew's study, Miss Natakova."

Lydia awarded Stuff a withering Catherine-the-Great stare. "I did not go to my nephew's study," she said through her expensive teeth. "Why should I?"

"Because the quarrel was more explosive than usual. It drew you to a window where you saw Nicholas' spiteful walk across the concrete, and Mikhail in the jalousie doorway waving a pistol. You were not only intrigued, but the ever-present wish to murder flashed a seemingly foolproof plan into your mind. When you hurried to the study, Miss Natakova, exactly what were you wearing?"

"My practice clothes naturally," Lydia said impatiently. "I've already told you I was—I was—" A deadly realization of her admission silenced her and her skin grew ashy.

"What persuasion you used to make Mikhail give you the gun only you, of course, know. Perhaps he simply put it down on this desk and you then picked it up and shot him. Perhaps you planned to lock the hall door on the inside to further the conceit that no one but Nicholas could have been with your nephew when the shot was fired. Herrick's chance passing and his rapping on the door made locking the door on the inside unnecessary. You knew he would wait a moment for Mikhail's permission before coming in. So you carried on with your inspirational idea and left by the jalousie door."

"Floating through the air, one presumes," Lydia said in a desperately futile effort to erase her former blunder, "across the patio's soft concrete?"

"No." Stuff dumped the contents of the paper bag out on the desk. "You were dressed in your practice clothes, as you just admitted, so naturally we know you were wearing these."

The pair of ballet shoes with their ankle ribbons lay flesh-pink on the dark mahogany of the desk.

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"There are cement smears ingrained on their blocked cloth toes, Miss Natakova. The pegleg holes in the concrete are no more than two feet apart and there are only four of them. You are the one person here who has the training, the perfect balance and muscular coordination required by a ballerina, to step from pegleg hole to pegleg hole—using one foot after the other and thereby avoiding the shoeprints—in other words, stepping from pegleg hole to pegleg hole *on the points of your toes!*"

It was Nicholas who shattered the deathly stillness.

"Your final dance," he said, "dear Lydia. And for a title I suggest the 'Danse Macabre.'"

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a new story by

P. G. WODEHOUSE

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**P. G. WODEHOUSE**
TITLE:	***Jeeves and the Stolen Venus***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	Marsham-in-the-Vale, England
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Meet Bertie Wooster, Aunt Dahlia, the female novelist Cornelia Fothergill, assorted Fothergills (artists)—and the immortal Jeeves. "What a man! There is none like him, none."*

THE TELEPHONE RANG, AND I heard Jeeves out in the hall dealing with it. Presently he trickled in.

"Mrs. Travers, sir."

"Aunt Dahlia? What does she want?"

"She did not confide in me, sir."

A bit oddish, it seems to me, looking back on it now, that as I went to the instrument I should have had no premonition, if that's the word I want, of an impending doom. Not psychic, that's my trouble.

"Hullo, old blood relation."

"Hullo, Bertie, you revolting young blot," she responded in her hearty way. "Are you sober?"

"As a judge."

"Then listen attentively. I'm speaking from an undersized hamlet in Hampshire called Marsham-in-the-Vale. I'm staying at Marsham Manor with Cornelia Fothergill, the novelist. Ever heard of her?"

"She is not on my library list."

"She would be, if you were a woman. I'm trying to persuade her to let me have her new novel as a serial for the *Boudoir*."

I got the gist. This aunt is the proprietor or proprietress of a weekly paper for the half-witted woman called *Milady's Boudoir*.

"How's it coming?" I asked.

"She's weakening. I have the feeling that one more shove will do the trick. That's why you're coming here for the week-end."

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"Who, me? Why me?"

"To help me sway her. You will exercise all your charm—"

"I haven't much."

"Well, exercise what you've got."

I'm not keen on these blind dates. And if life has taught me one thing, it is that the prudent man keeps away from female novelists.

"Will anyone else be there? Is there any bright young society, I mean?"

"I wouldn't call the society young, but it's very bright. There's Cornelia's husband, Everard Fothergill, the artist, and his father, Edward Fothergill. He's an artist, too, of a sort. You won't have a dull moment. So tell Jeeves to pack your effects."

It surprises many people, I believe, that Bertram Wooster, as a general rule a man of iron, is as wax in the hands of his Aunt Dahlia. They do not know that this woman possesses a secret weapon by which she can always bend me to her will—viz., the threat that if I give her any of my lip she will bar me from her dinner table and deprive me of the roasts and boilers of her French chef, Anatole, God's gift to the gastric juices.

And so it came about that towards the quiet evenfall of Friday the 22nd inst. I was at the wheel of the old sports model, tooling through Hants with Jeeves at my side, the brow furrowed and the spirits low.

Arrival at Marsham Manor did little to smooth the former and raise the latter. Shown into the hall, I found myself in as cozy an interior as one could wish to find—large log fire, comfortable chairs, and a tea-table that gave out an invigorating aroma of buttered toast and muffins. But a single glance at the personnel was enough to tell me that I had struck one of those joints where every prospect pleases and only man is vile.

Three human souls were present, each as outstanding a piece of cheese as Hampshire could provide. One was a small, thin citizen with a beard of the type that causes so much distress—my host, I presumed—and seated near him another bloke of much the same construction but an earlier model, whom I took to be the father. He, too, was bearded. The third was a large, spreading woman wearing the horn-rimmed spectacles which are always an occupational risk for pen-pushers of the gentler sex.

After a brief pause for identification, she introduced me to the gang, and presently Aunt Dahlia blew in, and we chatted of this and that. The Fothergill contingent pushed off, and I was heading in the same direction when Aunt Dahlia arrested my progress.

"Just a second, Bertie," she said. "I would like to show you something."

"And I," I riposted, "would like to know what this job is you say you want me to do for you."

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"I'll be coming to that shortly. This thing I'm going to show you is tied in with it. But first a word from our sponsor. Did you notice how jumpy Everard Fothergill is?"

"No. I didn't spot that. Is he jumpy?"

"He's a nervous wreck. Ask me why."

"Why?"

"Because of this picture I'm going to show you. Step this way."

She led me into the dining-room and switched on the light.

"Look," she said.

What she was drawing to my attention was a large oil painting. A classical picture, I suppose you would have called it: stout female in the minimum of clothing in conference with what appeared to be a dove.

"Venus?" I said. It's usually a safe bet.

"Yes. Old Fothergill painted it. He's just the sort of man who would paint a picture of Ladies' Night in a Turkish Bath and call it Venus. He gave it to Everard as a wedding present."

"I like the patine," I said. Another safe bet.

"No, you don't. The thing's a mess. The old boy's just an incompetent amateur. I got the whole strength of it from Cornelia one night. As I say, he gave this eyesore to Everard as a wedding present, and naturally, being devoted to his father and not wanting to hurt his feelings, Everard can't have it taken down and put in the cellar. So he has to sit looking at it every time he has a meal, and he suffers profusely. You see, Everard's a real artist. His stuff's good. Look at this," she said, indicating the picture next to old Fothergill's. "That's one of his things."

I took a steady look at Everard's effort. It, too, was a classical picture, and it seemed to me very like the other one.

"Venus?"

"Don't be an ass. Jocund Spring."

"Oh, sorry. Though, mark you, Sherlock Holmes would have made the same mistake. On the evidence, I mean."

"So now you understand."

"Far from it."

"I'll put it in words of one syllable. If a man can paint anything as good as that, it cuts him to the quick to have to glue his eyes on a daub like the Venus every time he puts on the nosebag."

"Oh, I see that, and the heart bleeds, of course. But I don't see there's anything to be done."

"I do. Ask me what."

"What?"

"You're going to steal that Venus."

"Steal it?"

"Tonight."

"When you say, 'steal it', do you mean *'steal* it'?"

"That's right. That's the job I alluded to. Good heavens," she said, "you're always stealing policemen's helmets, aren't you?"

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I had to correct this.

"Not always. Only as an occasional treat, as it might be on Boat Race night. And stealing pictures is a very different thing from lifting the headgear of the Force."

"There's nothing complex about it. You just cut it out of the frame with a sharp knife. You know, Bertie," she said, all enthusiasm, "it's extraordinary how things fit in. These last weeks there's been a gang of picture thieves working around this neighborhood. They pinched a Romney at a house near here and a Gainsborough from another house. When his Venus disappears, there won't be a chance of old Fothergill suspecting anything. These marauders are connoisseurs, he'll say to himself, only the best is good enough for them. Cornelia agreed with me."

"You told her?"

"Well, naturally. I was naming the Price of the Papers. I said that if she gave me her solemn word that she would let the *Boudoir* have this slush she's writing, shaving her usual price a bit, you would liquidate the Venus."

"You did, did you? And what did she say?"

"She thanked me brokenly, so go to it, boy, and heaven speed your efforts. All you have to do is open one of the windows, to make it look like an outside job, collect the picture, take it back to your room, and burn it. I'll see you have a good fire."

"Oh, thanks."

It was with bowed head and the feeling that the curse had come upon me that I proceeded to my room. Jeeves was there, studding the shirt, and I lost no time in putting him *au courant,* if that's the expression.

"Jeeves," I said, "here's a nice state of things. Do you know what Aunt Dahlia has just been springing on me?"

"Yes, sir. I chanced to be passing the door of the dining-room, and could not but overhear her observations. Mrs. Travers has a carrying voice."

"I suppose I'll have to do it, Jeeves."

"I fear so, sir. Taking into consideration the probability that, should you demur, Mrs. Travers will place sanctions on you in the matter of Anatole's cooking, you would appear to have no option but to fall in with her wishes. Are you in pain, sir?"

"No, just chafing. This has shocked me, Jeeves. Forcing a Wooster to become a picture-pincher! I wouldn't have thought such an idea would ever have occurred to her, would you?"

"The female of the species is more deadly than the male, sir. May I ask if you have formulated a plan of action?"

"Well, you heard the set-up as she envisages it. I open window—"

"Pardon me for interrupting, sir, but there I think Mrs. Travers is in

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error. A broken window would lend greater verisimilitude."

"It would also bring the whole ruddy household starting from their slumbers and coming to see what was going on."

"No, sir, it can be done quite noiselessly by smearing treacle on a sheet of brown paper, attaching the paper to the pane, and striking it with the fist."

"But where's the brown paper? Where's the treacle?"

"I can procure them, sir, and I shall be happy to perform the operation for you, if you wish."

"You will? That's very decent of you, Jeeves."

"Not at all, sir. It is my aim to give satisfaction. Excuse me, I think I hear someone knocking."

He went to the door and opened it, and I caught a glimpse of what looked like a butler.

"Your knife, sir," he said, coming back with it on a salver.

"Thank you, Jeeves, curse it." I regarded the object with a shudder. "I wish I could slide out of this binge."

"I can readily imagine it, sir."

After some deliberation we scheduled the kick-off for one o'clock in the morning, when the household might be expected to be getting their eight hours, and at one on the dot Jeeves shimmered in.

"Everything is in readiness, sir."

"The treacle?"

"Yes, sir."

"The brown paper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then just bust the window, would you mind?"

"I have already done so, sir."

"You have? Well, you were right about it being noiseless. I didn't hear a sound. Then, Ho for the dining-room, I suppose. No sense in putting it off."

"No, sir. If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly," he said.

It would be idle to pretend that, as I made my way down the stairs, I was my usual calm, debonair self. The feet were cold, and if there had been any sudden noises I would have started at them. My meditations on Aunt Dahlia, who had let me in for this, were rather markedly lacking in a nephew's love.

However, in one respect you had to hand it to her. She had said the thing would be as easy as falling off a log, and so it proved. She had in no way overestimated the sharpness of the knife with which she provided me. Four quick cuts, and the canvas fell out of the frame. I rolled it up and streaked back to my room with it.

Jeeves in my absence had been stoking the fire. I was about to feed Edward Fothergill's regrettable product to the flames and push it home with the poker, but he stopped me.

"It would be injudicious to burn so large an object in one piece, sir.

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There is the risk of setting the chimney on fire."

"Ah, yes. I see what you mean. Snip it up, you think?"

"I fear it is unavoidable, sir. Might I suggest that it would relieve the monotony of the task if I were to provide you with whiskey and a syphon?"

"You know where they keep it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then lead it to me, Jeeves."

"Very good, sir."

I was making good progress when the door opened without my hearing it and Aunt Dahlia stole in. She spoke before I knew she was there, causing me to shoot up to the ceiling with a stifled cry.

"Everything all right, Bertie?"

"I wish you'd blow your horn," I said, coming back to earth and speaking with not a little bitterness. "You made me bite my tongue. Yes, everything has gone according to plan. But Jeeves insists on burning the *corpus delicti* bit by bit."

"Well, of course. You don't want to set the chimney on fire."

"That's what he said."

"And he was right, as always. I've brought my scissors. Where is Jeeves, by the way? Why not at your side, giving selfless service?"

"Because he's giving selfless service elsewhere. He will be returning shortly with the whiskey decanter and all the trimmings."

"What a man! There is none like him, none. Bless my soul," said the relative, some minutes later, "how this brings back memories of the dear old school and our girlish cocoa parties. We used to sneak down to the headmistress's study and toast wholewheat bread on the end of pens, with the kettle simmering on the hob. Happy days, happy days. Ah, Jeeves, come right in and put it down well within my reach. We're getting on, you see. What is that you have on your arm?"

"The garden shears, madam. I am anxious to lend all the assistance that is within my power."

"Then start lending. Edward Fothergill's masterpiece awaits you."

With the three of us working away, we soon completed the job. I had scarcely got through my first whiskey and s. and begun on another when all that was left of the Venus, not counting the ashes, was the little bit at the southwest end which Jeeves was holding. He was regarding it with what seemed to me a rather thoughtful eye.

"Excuse me, madam," he said, "did I understand you to say that Mr. Fothergill senior's name was Edward?"

"That's right. Think of him as Eddie, if you wish. Why?"

"It is merely that the picture we have with us tonight is signed 'Everard Fothergill', madam."

To say that aunt and nephew did not take this big would be paltering with the truth. We skipped like the high hills.

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"Give me that fragment, Jeeves. It looks like Edward to me," I pronounced, having scrutinized it.

"You're crazy," said Aunt Dahlia, wrenching it from my grasp. "It's Everard, isn't it, Jeeves?"

"That was certainly the impression I formed, madam."

"Bertie," said Aunt Dahlia speaking in a voice of the kind which I believe is usually called strangled, and directing at me the sort of look which in the old hunting days she would have given a hound engaged in chasing a rabbit, "if you've burned the wrong picture—"

"Of course I haven't," I replied stoutly. "But if it will ease your mind, I'll go and see."

I had spoken, as I say, stoutly, and hearing me you would have said to yourself, "All is well with Bertram. He is unperturbed." But I wasn't. I feared the worst, and already I was wincing at the thought of the impassioned speech, touching on my mental and moral defects, which Aunt Dahlia would be delivering when we foregathered once more.

I was in no vein for another shock, but I got this when I reached journey's end, for as I entered the dining-room somebody inside it came bounding out and rammed me between wind and water. We staggered into the hall together, and as I had switched on the lights there, to avoid bumping into pieces of furniture, I was enabled to see him steadily and see him whole, as Jeeves says.

It was old Fothergill, in bedroom slippers and a dressing-gown. In his right hand he had a knife, and at his feet there was a bundle of some sort which he had dropped at the moment of impact, and when I picked it up for him in my courteous way and it came unrolled, what I saw brought a startled "Golly!" to my lips. It dead-heated with a yip of anguish from his. He had paled beneath his beard.

"Mr. Wooster!" he—quavered is, I think, the word. "Thank God you are not Everard!"

Well, I was pretty pleased about that, too, of course.

"No doubt," he proceeded, still quavering, "you are surprised to find me removing my picture by stealth in this way. But I can explain everything."

"Well, that's fine, isn't it?"

"You are not an artist—"

"No, more a literary man. I once wrote an article on What the Well-Dressed Man Is Wearing for *Milady's Boudoir.*"

"Nevertheless, I think I can make you understand what this picture means to me. I was two years painting it. It was my child. I watched it grow. I loved it. And then Everard married, and in a mad moment I gave it to him as a wedding present. You cannot imagine what agonies I suffered. I saw how he valued the picture. His eyes at meal times were always riveted on it. I could not

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bring myself to ask him for it back. And yet I was lost without it."

"So you decided to pinch it?"

"Exactly. I told myself that Everard would never suspect. There have been picture robberies in the neighborhood recently, and he would assume that this was the work of the same gang. And I yielded to temptation. Mr. Wooster, you would not betray me?"

"I wouldn't what?"

"You will not tell Everard?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. No, of course not, if you don't want me to. Sealed lips, you suggest?"

"Precisely."

"Right ho."

"Thank you, thank you. I knew you would not fail me. Well, one might as well be turning in, I suppose, so I will say good night," he said, and having done so, shot up the stairs like a homing rabbit. And scarcely had he disappeared when I found Aunt Dahlia and Jeeves at my side.

"Oh, there you are," I said.

"Yes, here we are. What's kept you all this time?"

"I would have made it snappier, but I was somewhat impeded in my movements by bearded artists."

"By what?"

"I've been chatting with Edward Fothergill."

"Bertie, you're blotto."

"Not blotto, but much shaken. Aunt Dahlia, I have an amazing story to relate."

I related my amazing story.

"And so," I concluded, "we learn once again the lesson never, however dark the outlook, to despair. The storm clouds lowered, the skies were black, but now what do we see? The sun shining and the bluebird working at the old stand. La Fothergill wanted the Venus expunged, and it has been expunged. Voila!" I said, becoming a bit Parisian.

"And when she finds that Everard's Jocund Spring has also been expunged?"

I h'med. I saw what she had in mind.

"Yes, there's that," I agreed.

"There isn't a chance now that she'll give me that serial."

"No, you have a point there. I had overlooked that."

She inflated her lungs, and it could have been perceived by the dullest eye that she was about to begin.

"Bertie—"

Jeeves coughed that soft cough of his, the one that sounds like a sheep clearing its throat on a distant mountainside.

"I wonder if I might make a suggestion, madam?"

"Yes, Jeeves? Remind me," she said, turning to me, "to go on with what I was saying later."

"It is merely that it occurs to me as a passing thought, madam, that there *is* a solution to the difficulty that confronts us. If Mr. Wooster were to be found here lying stunned, the window broken and

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both pictures removed, Mrs. Fothergill could scarcely but assume that he had been overcome, while endeavoring to protect her property, by miscreants making a burglarious entry."

Aunt Dahlia came up like a rocket from the depths of gloom.

"I see what you mean. She would be so all over him for his plucky conduct that she couldn't decently fail to let me have that serial at my own price."

"Precisely, madam."

"Thank you, Jeeves."

"Not at all, madam."

"A colossal scheme, don't you think, Bertie?"

"Supercolossal," I assented, "but with one rather serious flaw. I allude to the fact that I am not lying stunned."

"We can arrange that. I could give you a tiny little tap on the head . . . with what, Jeeves?"

"The gong stick suggests itself, madam."

"That's right, with the gong stick. You would hardly feel it."

"I'm not going to feel it."

"You mean you won't play ball? Think well, Bertram Wooster. Reflect what the harvest will be. Not a smell of Anatole's cooking will you get for months and months and months. He will dish up his Sylphides á la creme d'Ecrevisses and his Timbales de ris de veau Toulousiane and whatnot, but you will not be there to dig in and get yours. This is official."

I drew myself to my full height.

"There is no terror, Aunt Dahlia, in your threats, for . . . how does it go, Jeeves?"

"For you are armed so strong in honesty, sir, that they pass by you like the idle wind, which you respect not."

"Exactly. I have been giving considerable thought, Aunt Dahlia, to this matter of Anatole's cooking, and I have reached the conclusion that the thing is one that cuts both ways. Heaven, of course, to chew his smoked offerings, but what of the waistline? The last time I enjoyed your hospitality I put on a full inch around the middle. I am better without Anatole's cooking. I don't want to look like Uncle George."

I was alluding to the present Lord Yaxley, a prominent clubman who gets more prominent yearly, especially seen sideways.

"So," I continued, "agony though it may be, I am prepared to kiss those Timbales of which you speak goodbye, and I, therefore, meet your suggestion that you should give me tiny little taps on the head with a resolute nolle prosequi."

"That is your last word, is it?"

"It is," I said, turning on my heel, and it was, for even as I spoke something struck me a violent blow on the back hair, and I fell like some monarch of the forest beneath the axe of the woodman.

The next thing I remember with

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any clarity is finding myself in bed with a sort of booming noise going on close by. This, the mists having lifted, I was able to diagnose as Aunt Dahlia talking.

"Bertie," she was saying, "I wish you would listen and not let your attention wander. I've got news that will send you singing about the house."

"It will be some little time," I responded coldly, "before I go singing about any ruddy houses. My head—"

"A little the worse for wear, no doubt. But don't let's go off into side issues. I want to tell you the final score. The dirty work is attributed on all sides to the gang, probably international, which got away with the Gainsborough and the Romney. The Fothergill is all over you, as Jeeves foresaw she would be, and she's given me the serial on easy terms. You were right about the bluebird. It's singing."

"So is my head."

"I know. And, as you would say, the heart bleeds. But you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"Your own?"

"No, Jeeves's. He said it in a hushed voice as we stood viewing the remains."

"He did, did he? Well, I trust that in future . . . . Oh, Jeeves," I said, as he entered carrying what looked like a cooling drink.

"Sir?"

"This matter of eggs and omelettes?"

"Yes, sir?"

"From now on, if you could see your way to cutting out the eggs and laying off the omelettes, I should be greatly obliged."

"Very good, sir. I will bear it in mind."

The Flaw in the Ring in the Fish

The character named Joe said he "studied the alphabet," and besides M (W) and O he found only three more letters that could be read upside down and backwards—H, I, and X. Which alphabet did Joe study? What about—in sans-serif letters small enough to be engraved in a ring—N and S and Z? Try them yourself; print the capitals N, S, and Z in simple block style—and then read them upside down.

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Introducing a new detective in a new series of short-shorts . . . Meet Jonas P. Jonas, a garrulous old codger, who would love to have his detective experiences recorded for posterity—all he needs is a "Dr. Watson" he can call his own. But conceited as Uncle Jonas undoubtedly is, he is also—under the egotism and boastfulness, under the flattering opinion he has of his past triumphs—a shrewd and penetrating observer; and he has a knack for dovetailing the seemingly unrelated bits and pieces into a picture of the truth . . .

Mr. Jonas's next memoir: "The Case of the Blue Bowl."

THE CASE OF THE TWO QUESTIONS

by E. X. FERRARS

EVER SINCE I MARRIED INTO THE family of Jonas P. Jonas, he has been trying to persuade me to "ghost" his memoirs for him. He has said to me more than once, "What a shame it is that all those experiences of mine haven't been written down! Ah, what wouldn't I give for your knack with words, my dear! And what wouldn't you give for some of my experiences, eh?"

In fact, I should hate to have had his experiences. Few writers really want experiences. They want peace and quiet, relieved by the arrival of substantial checks. I was careful to make that clear to Uncle Jonas before I even agreed to listen to him.

He waved it aside. "Listen, my dear, for years I had to be discreet. For years I had to keep my mouth shut about almost everything that happened to me—just as I had to wear drab clothes and behave in a drab way so that people wouldn't remember having seen me. It's only since I retired that I've been able to wear fancy waistcoats or suede shoes when I wanted to. So you see what it means to me just to talk."

By then I knew very well what it meant to him "just to talk."

He went on, "Of course, it's when you know you've been clever that it's hardest not to confide in your friends. You want to ask them what they'd have done in your place, and then show them they wouldn't have been half as bright as you were.

"For instance, what d'you think you'd have done if a nice-looking young girl, whose eyes were almost crazy with worry, had come to see you in your office, refused to give her name, and said she just wanted to ask you two questions?

"The first question was: Is it pos-

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sible for a middle-aged woman to go out of a room, get a rifle from somewhere, run about a hundred yards, shoot a man through the head, get rid of the rifle, run home again, and come back into the room without puffing for breath or having a hair of her head disarranged, all in five minutes?

"And second: Was it possible for a car to be driven through a watersplash and back again, without its tires getting wet?"

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "What would you have said?"

"I don't know," I replied. "What *did* you say?"

"I said no."

"Just no?"

"What else was there to say? I told you, in those days I never talked any more than I could help."

"And what did the girl do?"

"She said thank you, got up and walked to the door. Then she turned and looked at me and her eyes were as worried as ever. So I knew, of course, she hadn't yet asked the questions she *really* wanted to ask. People never do at first, you know. You have to give them time. So just to help her along, I said, 'You lied at the inquest, then?'

"She gave a little gasp, and said, 'How did you know? I haven't even told you who I am.'

"I said, 'Well, I read the papers, and it isn't every murder that happens close to a watersplash. You're the secretary, aren't you?—the girl who said Sara Selkirk never left the house that evening.'

"She came back to the chair and sat down again. She said, 'That's what Miss Selkirk asked me to say. She said it was just to save her from a lot of nasty publicity. And I didn't see how she could possibly have had anything to do with the murder, so I didn't mind agreeing. But you see, she is in love with the other brother, the one who's inherited all the money. And so, somehow, ever since I told those lies at the inquest, I've been almost worried to death."

I interrupted him. "Just a minute, Uncle Jonas. I realize you're talking about the Deakin murder, but I was too young at the time to grasp all the details. Perhaps if you could just fill in the picture a little . . ."

He nodded, a Cheshire grin on his face. "Well, you see, it was Mortimer, the elder of the Deakin brothers, the rich one, who got murdered. Mortimer was a widower whose wife had left him a lot of money. Hubert, the younger brother, was an unsuccessful painter, and he lived in a tumbledown cottage that didn't even have a garage or a driveway—that's important, because it explains why Mortimer used to leave his car, a nice Bentley, in the road, about thirty yards from the cottage, when he visited Hubert.

"The number of those visits to Hubert suddenly went up when Mortimer discovered that Hubert's nearest neighbor was Sara Selkirk, the actress—a very striking woman,

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as I remember her, very thin and decadent-looking, as was the fashion at the time. The two cottages were about a hundred yards apart, with a watersplash across the lane about halfway between the two of them.

"But Sara hadn't reciprocated Mortimer's interest. The events of that evening—the evening of the murder—started, you might say, with Sara's telephone ringing and her saying to Helen Hudson, her secretary, 'There's that wretched man again. You answer for me and say I'm out.' Then, as the girl went to the telephone, Sara said, 'While you're at it I'll just pop out and put the car away.'

"So Helen answered the telephone, but it wasn't Mortimer; it was a wrong number, or so she supposed, because when she said hello there was just a click and then nothing. So she put the telephone down again, and a few minutes later Sara came back. She hadn't been gone more than five minutes. Yet later that night, when the police called in with the news that Mortimer Deakin had been found dead in his car, shot through the head, she made Helen promise not to mention that she'd been out of the room at all.

"The girl thought there couldn't be much harm in agreeing, because she knew that Sara, who was forty, a chain-smoker and anemic into the bargain, couldn't have run a hundred yards to where Mortimer's car was, done the shooting, run back and come in again, cool as a cucumber, all in five minutes.

"But just to make sure that Sara hadn't gone there and back by car, Helen went to the garage, and there she found that the tires of Sara's car were perfectly dry. So she couldn't have driven it through the watersplash. And yet, although it was quite clear that Sara couldn't possibly have done the murder, the poor secretary got more and more worried about the lies she had told at the inquest. And so she came to me, to see if I could set her mind at rest.

"She'd been spurred on to do something because the police seemed to suspect the young man who had reported finding the car with the body in it, and Helen happened to be very interested in that young man. The police didn't suspect Hubert at that time, though he had the most obvious motive, because his old housekeeper, deaf as a post but absolutely honest, swore he'd never been out of the house that night.

"It was conceivable, of course, that Hubert might have shot Mortimer, as he sat in the car from a window of the cottage, without the housekeeper hearing it; but Hubert could hardly have done it, and got Mortimer slap through the forehead, unless Mortimer had been sitting in the car with the lights on inside it. The headlights were on, but that would only have made it

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harder for Hubert to see Mortimer behind them, and the first thing Helen's young man told the police was that the dead man had been sitting in the car in darkness.

"No, as the evidence then stood, Hubert had nothing whatever to fear from the police. He couldn't possibly have shot his brother."

"And yet, as I remember the Deakin case," I said, "they did arrest Hubert in the end and hang him."

Uncle Jonas gave a satisfied smile. "Yes, because of something I told them after the secretary had come to see me. I told them that although Sara couldn't possibly have skipped along that dark road and done the shooting herself, she could have helped Hubert—if the telephone was a signal from him that Mortimer had just gone out to his car to start the journey back to London.

"Sara could then have gone out to her car and turned her headlights full on, just before driving the car into the garage. And that would have made Mortimer, silhouetted against the beam of light, a perfect target for Hubert at his window. The only problem, I told them, was what Hubert had done with the rifle. Well, he'd popped it down an old well in his coal cellar.

"Yes, I told them all that, and then, of course, I tactfully withdrew. It was always very important to me, being on good terms with the police, and that meant knowing the right moment to withdraw tactfully. And I really believe you're the first person I've told the story to since then."

Somehow I doubted that, but I did not see the virtue of saying so.

"Make what use of it you like," he added magnanimously. "I just like to talk, and it's enough for me if you're really interested. Though if you *should* happen to use any of it . . ." He paused, and a shrewd glint came into his eye. "Well, we can talk terms later on, can't we?"

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **DICK ASHBAUGH**

TITLE: ***Rich Little Poor Girl***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *As we have said before, the author has a "way" with people—in this case, with teen-agers, committee women, cab driver, doorman, assorted gangsters—and in a manner of speaking, Lucretia Borgia. Delicious change of pace!*

FOR ONCE IN MY LIFE I HAD MY Saturday all planned. I was going to wash my drip drys, take a tuck in my toreadors to make them more interesting, practice come-hithers, and read a book. I got exactly nothing done because Kathy Kennedy called in the middle of the night. Actually it was the middle of breakfast, but it seems like the middle of the night when people call you at that hour on Saturday.

As I came back from the phone Mother tilted one eyebrow and my father lowered the corner of his paper. Everybody is curious about early morning calls because they have an air of emergency. "It's a sort of emergency," I said. "Kathy Kennedy wants me to help out at the church white elephant sale. They're simply snowed under with stuff."

"That should be nice and dull," said my father. "At least it will silence the rock and roll for a while."

"It's kind of fun in a way," I said. "We get to sort through the stuff and try dresses on before the committee prices them. Last year they had some fabulous things."

"Keep your eye out for a suede jacket, size thirty-four," said my mother. "I need something to bang around the supermarket."

My father glared at me. "Now look, Mary Alice, don't drag a lot of junk home that will wind up in

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the attic. That attic is ready to burst now."

Kathy said we might be asked to work in a booth, so I put on heels and hose and my fairly decent skirt-and-sweater set. When you wear school uniforms day in and day out you feel dressed up in almost anything.

The school gym was full of nervous women when I got there. "Jeepers, what a clambake," said Kathy, her round face set in a glum look. "Nobody knows nothing. Which is a double negative and don't remind me."

"Where's Mrs. O'Shaughnessy?" I asked. "Last year she had everything running like Smoothsville."

"Having her yearly baby. Number eight. But I wouldn't be surprised to see her come walking in between feedings." She clutched desperately at a passing committee member. "Go sort," said the committee member, waving vaguely. "The cafeteria, I think."

We meandered to the cafeteria and it was the same sort of madhouse. Another committee member pushed us toward a pile of boxes. "Open them," she said. "Sort the clothing into piles. Sportswear, casuals, coats, suits, and so forth. And *don't* try everything on. Sometimes you young people are more trouble than you're worth." And *she* sailed away.

"Well, thank *you*, Lucretia Borgia," said Kathy. She looked at the pile of boxes. "Be my guest."

We worked steadily for about an hour, sorting and piling. Suddenly Kathy gave a little squeal and practically disappeared headfirst into a huge packing case. She came up slowly, her eyes as big as dinner plates.

"Holy Toledo! Mary Alice, look at *this* little item." Groaning slightly, she lifted it out of the box. It was a perfectly stunning mink coat.

"Is—is it real?" I gasped.

"It's real, all right," said Kathy. "Not only real, but practically new. Look at the lining."

"Somebody goofed," I said. "Can you tell who it's from?"

"Should be a name tag somewhere . . . . Yes, here it is. Barbara E. Ewing. Hey, I know her! That is, I used to know her before her folks got wealthy. We went to St. Agatha's together."

"Nobody's *that* wealthy," I said. "I'll get Lucretia Borgia over here and find out what to do."

Madame Borgia came hurrying over. "Oh, good grief," she said. "Obviously this was packed by mistake. I'll call Mrs. Ewing right away. You two stay right here."

In a few minutes she was back, smiling nervously. "The coat belongs to her daughter all right. She's very relieved that you found it. You're to take it out to their place on Riverside Drive. Get a cab and she'll pay for it. I suppose both of you had better go, but hurry back." She bustled away.

"How will we carry it?" I asked.

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"We'll need a big bag or something."

"Don't be silly," said Kathy. "We'll *wear* it. That is, you will and I'll carry your other coat. I'd wear it myself if I wasn't built like a Bartlett pear." She plunged into the carton and came up with a small felt hat in a luscious melon shade. "Might as well go all out. Here's one of her old hats. Just a Paris original, that's all."

I slipped on the coat and it felt like drowning in whipped cream. I was glad I'd worn heels, and with the hat and my brown suede purse with the gold medallion it made a terrific outfit.

"Funny what a few little touches will do," mused Kathy. "You look strictly Park Avenue."

"Oh, sure," I said. "A few touches like a five thousand dollar mink coat and a hat that would buy school shoes for our whole class."

As we walked toward the cab stand, Kathy kept circling around me. "You know, it just struck me," she said, "how much you look like Barbara Ewing. You have about the same height and figure, and she has blue-black hair with those big pansy eyes. She's home from school for a few days. I saw her at church Sunday."

"I've never met her," I said, "but I'll take your word for it."

We got one of those friendly, talkative drivers and I couldn't help noticing how he studied me in the mirror. Finally he said, "Hey, miss, do you know you left a pair of gloves in my cab last Sunday? I turned them in at the office."

"It must have been someone else," I said. "I wasn't in your cab Sunday."

"Are you kidding?" He pulled up for a light and turned to look at me. "You got to be," he said, his lower jaw jutting. "I took you to this same address. I never confuse a face."

Kathy glanced at the identification card framed on the back of the seat. "Well, Bernard F. Schlaffman," she said, "I've got news for you. This is one you've confused." She nudged me with her elbow. "See, what did I tell you? He thinks you're Barbara Ewing."

The driver frowned. "Then you ain't?"

"She ain't," said Kathy. "She isn't even a poor relation."

The cab swung into a curving drive and slid under the canopy of the Alcazar apartments. A big chesty doorman, the kind you see in the movies, came striding out and swung the door back. "Well, well, Miss Barbara," he boomed. "Back so soon. Ten to one you forgot something." He stopped and stared as I stepped out. "Oh, for Pete's sake," he said. "I beg your pardon, ma'am. I thought you were Miss Ewing."

"You aren't the only one, Admiral," said Kathy following me out. "But we are looking for the Ewing apartment. What floor?"

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The doorman shook his head. "Now, that's one for the books. Oh, the Ewing apartment? Sixteen. The whole floor, so you can't miss it. I'll buzz them for you."

He picked up the lobby phone and pressed the button several times. Then he frowned. "That's mighty peculiar. No answer. I was just talking to the maid up there a few minutes ago." He hung up the phone. "Well, you two look safe enough. Go ahead.

The automatic elevator clicked slowly upward and I took a good look at myself in the full-length mirror. "Jeepers, Kathy," I said, "I feel like Cinderella just before the stroke of midnight." The doors hissed open and we stepped into one of those beautiful classic black-and-white foyers.

"It's still the movies," said Kathy in a hushed voice. "I can't wait to see the butler open that door. If he thinks you're Barbara I'll start believing it myself."

We could hear the door-buzzer echoing faintly inside. Then the door clicked and swung open silently. We both looked at each other.

"It's probably electronic," said Kathy. "Let's go in." She grinned and said loudly. "After you, Miss Ewing. I just work here."

We both started giggling as I pulled the mink coat around me and swished in. "Better give that butler his notice," said Kathy. "He can't treat you—" Her voice ended suddenly in a choked gurgle.

It was as though an electric current shot through me and I knew something was wrong, awfully wrong, in that apartment. The next instant I found out. I barely glimpsed the dark, quick-moving figure in back of me. One arm went around my neck in a choking hold, and I felt myself pulled helplessly backward with no chance to scream or even struggle. I guess I must have fainted or blacked out for a moment, because the next thing I knew I was sitting in a deep leather chair in a paneled room that looked like a small library or den.

When you find yourself sitting down against your will in a strange place, you have a powerful urge to stand up. I tried it, but the same hand slammed me back so hard my feet flew up and my skirt slid over my knees. I pulled my skirt down and decided maybe I'd better be quiet and find out what this was all about.

"Just take it easy, baby," a man's voice purred in my ear. "Cute kid, isn't she?"

"Yes." Another figure came into view, a tall, thin man with a young face and an almost completely bald head. He stood looking down at me, his eyes half shut and the smoke from his cigarette curling up around his face. He looked sort of distinguished in a sneaky way. It was all too weird.

"You will observe, Rocco, my uncouth friend, the sleekness of this package. No rough edges. Every-

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thing hand-tooled and expensive. That's what money and breeding does. A convent school, I would guess. They have a way with these young fillies."

"The other one looked like some kind of maid. We took her back to the kitchen. She's a wildcat. Gave Hymie an awful belt on the shins."

"Fine. We'll let Hymie work out the servant problem. Our concern is with this delightful bit of Dresden. Would you believe it, this pastry has over ten thousand dollars in her very own little checking account? How would you like to have a father like that?"

Up to this point I just sat there stunned. Finally I managed to get a message through to my voice box. "I don't know who you are," I squeaked, "but you're all goofed up. I came here to see Mrs. Ewing. I'm not who I think you are. I mean, I'm not who I am you think." My tongue got all twisted so I stopped and started over. "Look, if you'll kindly call Mrs. Ewing she will explain everything."

"In time, my dear, in time," said Baldy. "Your mother is—er—tied up at the moment. And I'm afraid I mean that literally."

"My mother!" All of a sudden I had a crazy urge to laugh. "My mother!" I shrieked, doubling over. I saw Baldy's feet move, and then my head was jerked back and he slapped me so hard it made my teeth ache. For a moment I thought something had jarred loose in my head. My eyes were open but I couldn't see anything but exploding stars. It hurt terribly.

When my head cleared the bald one was standing in front of me holding a portrait in a narrow gold frame. "They must be pretty fond of you around here," he said. "Pictures all over the place. When was this one taken?"

I had no desire to get slapped again so I mumbled, "Last year."

He flicked it with his fingernail. "You should have left your hair long." He put the picture down. "Now, my dear," he said, lounging against the desk, "we have plans for you."

"I don't know what they are," I said, half sobbing. "But my father will never let you get away with it."

"Oh, come now," said Baldy. "We know as well as you do that your father is in Bolivia opening a tin mine or a string of hotels, or some such lucrative caper. We're professionals, sugar plum. We've had this planned for a long time. Now let's hope you are as splendidly cooperative as your mother. Of course, Mother didn't quite see things our way at first, so we let Hymie talk to her. Hymie is a man of few words."

"If you harmed her, my father will kill you," I said. Somehow or other that sounded like the right thing to say. The awful scared feeling I'd had at first was beginning to die down. I realized I'd just have to be a Barbara Ewing for a while and

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play along with them or somebody might get hurt. I thought of poor Kathy back in the kitchen with that awful Hymie.

"Please don't hurt anybody," I pleaded. "I mean, like the servants."

The other man spoke up. "Okay, but you better tell that maid of yours to calm down. The cook and the other maid got some sense."

Oh, brother! I thought. Kathy will love this. My maid. I almost giggled out loud. "All right," I said, "what am I supposed to do?"

The bald one looked at his watch and picked up a piece of paper from the desk. He walked over and held it in front of me. "Now tell me, my child, what does this look like to you?"

"It's—it's a check."

"Bingo. As a matter of fact, it's a check made out for fifty thousand dollars. Unfortunately, all that was available. Now, who has signed this check?"

I looked hard at the signature but I couldn't make out the long, slanting writing. There was a name printed in the upper left hand corner, so I read that. "Hilda M. Ewing," I said.

"Exactly," he murmured, leaning over me and letting the smoke wreathe up around his eyes. I was beginning to think he was an awful ham. "Your adoring mother."

"Well," I said, "you got the check. Why don't you go away and leave us alone?"

"There's a little matter of converting the check into cash," he said. "We've made arrangements for that, however. Your mother was simply splendid about calling the bank. Of course, the fact that Hymie was standing behind her with a Swedish steel carving knife pressed against her jugular vein may have had something to do with it."

"Oh," I said in a small voice. "But I still don't see what I'm supposed to do."

"Very simple. Your mother talked to the manager of the branch here in Walnut Hills—a Mr. Mercer. The bank closes at noon, but Mr. Mercer will remain open a few minutes longer to await your arrival—a favor he was happy to do for the Ewing family."

"Then I'm supposed to go to the bank with you?"

"Exactly. You are not only a zesty baggage, but you are bright. I am Mr. Hobson from your father's office. Mr. Mercer will have the cash ready. All you have to do is hand him the check and dimple prettily. Your mother has explained that she is leaving by plane this evening to join your father, and the cash is needed for a business transaction. Beautiful Yankee dollars that will never see South America."

"May I see my mother before I leave?" A small hope was beginning to form in my mind. Once Mrs. Ewing got a look at me the whole crazy business would blow sky high. I couldn't wait to see the expression on Baldy's face when he

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found out I wasn't Barbara Ewing. I hoped he'd turn green.

"Of course. She's in the kitchen with the others, meditating about life and telling her beads. At this point I'd like to give you a warning, my little cupcake. If you make any kind of false move in the bank or any place else, your mother and the servants will undergo some rather messy surgery. Hymie used to work in a packing plant. He'll stay here with them until we're safely back with the boodle. Do you read me?"

"Yes," I said, and shuddered.

"Fine. Now we'll step back to the kitchen and you can see your mother."

We walked down the long hallway into the big gleaming kitchen and my heart sank. Mrs. Ewing sat in a chair so tightly bound she couldn't move and she was completely gagged with a wide strip of adhesive tape over her mouth. An older, gray-haired woman who must have been the cook, and a younger girl in a maid's uniform were tied the same way on other chairs. Kathy was nowhere in sight.

"Observe," said Baldy. "Your mother may be a little uncomfortable, but it's only temporary. She has not been harmed."

"But the other one," I said frantically. "The one who came in with me. Where is she?"

A fat, greasy-looking individual came out of the pantry honing a long carving knife. "You mean the tiger? Oh, I shoved her in the cooler. She was yakking her head off. All about everything being a mistake."

"Go get her," snapped Baldy. "I told you, Hymie, no rough stuff."

"Okay, okay, don't get excited." The greasy one disappeared. I looked at Mrs. Ewing and her eyes were wide with a curious, puzzled expression. I knew now that I would have to go through with the whole masquerade, and I might as well make it good. I walked over to the chair and put my hand on her shoulder. "Mother," I said, "do you want me to do as these men say?"

Her head nodded up and down emphatically, and she looked at me imploringly. "All right," I said quietly, and squeezed her shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll do it, and then everything will be okay." Her head nodded up and down again, and I had the feeling she was trying to thank me with her eyes.

There was a rattling crash from the pantry, and Hymie came out half carrying Kathy, who was kicking and squirming in front of him. Her eyes were flashing and she was mad clear through. Baldy walked across to her. "Now, now my pet," he said, "calm down." Then he slapped her viciously across the face.

"You—you creep," she screamed. "I dare you to turn me loose." For a girl Kathy is as strong as a bull. Once, at a school outing, I saw her knock a full grown boy clear across a picnic table. He had bragged about

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making out with her. But this was different, and I thought I'd better do something quick before there was worse trouble.

"Katherine!" I said as sharply as I could. "You will stop that immediately. As a servant in this house, you're to keep your place."

The shock of what I said calmed her down. She looked at me sulkily and I knew she had caught on. "All right, Miss Barbara," she mumbled, "I'll do whatever you say." It was a perfect act, but I saw her glaring at Baldy and rubbing her cheek.

"I think we had better take her with us," I said to Baldy. "It would be better that way."

"You can say that again," said the greasy one. "Leave her around here and I ain't responsible."

Baldy shrugged. "I have no objections." He swung back his coat and I could see the sort of shoulder holster that gangsters wear on TV. "Hymie, what about a car?"

"It's sittin' down there in the garage waitin'," said Hymie. "I picked out a nice big Caddy with the key in it and a full tank."

"Good boy. We'll take a cab to the bank and back so the cops won't have a license number to work on. Rocco is down in the foyer now conning the doorman. All you have to do is sit here, keep your big fat mouth shut, and sharpen your tools."

Riding down in the elevator I looked at myself in the mirror again. I was still playing Cinderella in my mink, but I would have given anything to be back with Lucretia Borgia and the nervous women. If something went wrong we'd all be killed, and I didn't want to die, not even in a five thousand dollar mink coat and a Paris hat. I looked at Kathy and she gave me a quick, solemn wink and a little smile. It made me feel better.

I don't know what the one called Rocco had said to the doorman, but they were certainly Palsville as we came out of the lobby. They were laughing and slapping each other on the back. Rocco looked around at us. "We're in luck," he said. "Got a cab waiting right here."

Baldy turned toward me with a little bow, a perfect gentleman. I couldn't help thinking how easily he could pass for a society playboy—very correct in a casual way, and sort of charming. Then I thought of that vicious look on his face when he slapped Kathy, and it made me boiling mad.

I felt a little twinge of surprise when I saw our friend, Bernard J. Schlaffman, hunched over the wheel of the cab, and then I remembered we had asked him to wait for us. He looked at me as though he was about to say something, then closed his mouth. I think he was so confused by this time it didn't matter.

As the doorman handed me in the cab I managed a little smile and said, "Thank you, Mr. Kupperman." With that Irish face, I knew

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that couldn't possibly be his name, but I thought he might as well be as confused as everybody else.

I sat in the middle, with the Rocco person on one side and Baldy on the other. Kathy was hunched on the jump seat in front of Baldy, half leaning toward the driver's partition. Just before we moved away the cab motor seemed to race for an unusually long time, and I thought I saw Kathy's lips moving. Baldy saw it too, because he gave the back of her jump seat a jarring kick. "All right, butterball," he said. "Sit up straight and close that partition. You haven't got anything to say to the driver."

Kathy gave him a nasty look over her shoulder, "I was just saying hello. He's my uncle."

"Your uncle?" Baldy laughed. "Your uncle who?"

"My uncle Bernard J. Schlaffman, that's who. I was just saying hello."

Baldy leaned forward and looked at the identification card. "All right, so it's your uncle, Bernard J. Schlaffman, and you've said hello. Now keep your mouth shut." Kathy sat up very stiffly, staring straight ahead.

Baldy lit a cigarette and leaned toward me again with the wreathing act. "There's one other item, cupcake," he said. "It's included in the package deal we made with your mother. Seems as though you have a fat little checking account of your own. When we get to the bank you will write out a personal check for ten thousand, which Mr. Mercer will happily cash for you per your mother's instructions. Again, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear," I said hopelessly. And then the thought struck me. Mr. Mercer! Certainly he would know Barbara Ewing. If he got suspicious enough he might be able to do something. On the other hand, it might make things even worse. All I could do was hope.

All the way over to Walnut Hills, Baldy kept glancing at his watch. We pulled up in front of the bank just four minutes after twelve. "Wait here, driver," he said. "We'll be right out." He offered me his arm with a mocking little smile.

As we climbed out of the cab, Kathy managed to stumble against me. "I think I got through to Uncle Bernard," she whispered quickly. "Say a prayer."

"Okay, butterball," said Baldy, pulling her away. "You stay out here in front with cousin Rocco. Miss Ewing and I will step inside for the ceremonies." He turned to me with a little bow. "After you, my dear. We musn't keep Mr. Mercer waiting any longer."

As we came up to the plate glass doors, a dignified white-haired man hurried across the bank lobby, smiling widely. He unlocked a smaller side door and opened it just wide enough for us to enter. "My, my, Barbara," he said, still smiling. "You've grown up into a lovely young lady."

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"I—I have?" I said weakly with a sinking heart. He took my arm and guided me across the lobby.

"You certainly have," he said in that depressingly jovial tone. "Seems to me the last time I saw you, you were wearing braids. Your father often brought you in when I was at the downtown office. Now, just step back here. I believe we have everything ready. You have your mother's check?"

I didn't have the check, and I looked at Baldy. "Yes, sir, Mr. Mercer," he said smoothly. "I have it right here. I'm Hobson, from Mr. Ewing's office."

"Yes, of course. Mrs. Ewing spoke of you." He turned to me. "By the way, Barbara, your mother mentioned that you also wished to make a sizeable withdrawal. Would you mind writing out the check now so I could get the amount. We'd like to close the vault as soon as possible. Just step over there to the customer's desk." He went on through a swinging door and came around in back of the cashier's counter.

I walked slowly over to the glass-topped desk and picked up a pen. There were several people working in the rear of the bank, and an armed guard was doing something to the door of the vault, but they hardly glanced at us. "Don't forget, cupcake, an even ten thousand," Baldy murmured. He strolled casually toward the cashier's counter.

The whole thing was eerie and unreal. Outside I could see Kathy and the Rocco person standing very still, watching the shoppers stroll by. Through the windshield of the cab, Uncle Bernard Schlaffman's round red face hung suspended over the wheel like a harvest moon. I had never written a check in my life except in business class at school. When I came to the figure ten thousand, my mind went blank and I couldn't remember how many zeroes. Baldy sauntered back and looked over my shoulder. "You're doing fine, cupcake," he murmured. "Now sign the thing and let's get out of here." I signed the check very carefully and walked over to the counter with Baldy at my side.

Mr. Mercer did pretty much what I expected him to do when he looked at the check. His eyes widened a little and he looked at me sharply, the smile gone completely. Then he changed abruptly and became very jovial again. I could see Baldy shifting tensely at my side. "Anything wrong, Mr. Mercer?" he asked.

"No. Nothing at all," said Mr. Mercer. "The—er—amount is rather large, and I'd better check the balance. Won't take a second."

"Hold it!" snapped Baldy. There was a little swishing sound and the gun came out just far enough to be visible. "Don't move," he said in a low, hoarse voice, "or both of you will be very dead. Just slip the mon-

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ey in an envelope, friend, and hand it over. Miss Ewing and I will then walk out of the place."

"Miss Ewing?" His eyebrows went up.

"That's what I said. Anything happen to her and this bank wouldn't be worth blowing up. Now act!"

Mr. Mercer just stood there as if he were in a trance. I saw Baldy's hand move and the gun came up level with the counter. There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I grabbed for his gun arm and hung on for dear life. The gun went off with a terrific, echoing roar and the whole place seemed to explode into action. There were screams and shouts and I felt myself being dragged along the marble floor, bumping and banging into things. The next thing I knew we were at the front door and Baldy was twisting at the key, panting and grunting like an animal. The door opened a little and he got his head and shoulders outside, but he was stuck with me hanging on his arm like an anchor.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, I saw Kathy's round face reflected in the door panel. She was outside standing directly in front of Baldy's protruding head and shoulders. "Ye-ow!" she shouted like an Indian. "What a dish!" Then she swung from her heels. I could feel the jolt all the way down Baldy's arm, and he sagged down on one knee. Instantly the sidewalk in front of the bank was swarming with policemen. I quietly fainted, mink coat, Paris hat and all.

It was quite a bit later before I was able to put the whole story together. Kathy and I were being driven home in Ewing's big Cadillac. "I got through to Bernard J. Schlaffman all right," she said, "and he put a code signal on his radio telephone in the cab. That's where the police radio came from. They grabbed Rocco, and you know the rest." She slouched down with a sigh. "That's funny about you calling the doorman Mr. Kupperman. No wonder he got suspicious. His name is Timothy Muldoon, and he used to be on the police force. That Hymie looked like he had been hit by a truck. What are you going to wear when we go to Ewing's tomorrow for dinner? To get our reward and all that jazz?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said airily. "I may buy a whole new outfit. After all, I'm loaded. Mr. Mercer let me keep this for a souvenir."

"What is it?"

"It's a check for ten thousand dollars, cupcake," I said. "Take a look."

"Yeah," said Kathy. "A check for ten thousand dollars. Signed by Lucretia Borgia."

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A generation or so ago, when this story was first published, an author was not permitted to refer in print to a woman's legs—they had to be called "limbs"; even the phrase "a devil in her eye" was subject to bowdlerizing (our authority: the late Gelett Burgess); and when a male character brought a female character home after a society ball or a middle-class movie, the author did not dare end the scene at the door with three dots (. . .)—they implied too much! But, as always, Dashiell Hammett skirted even the most prudish of editorial taboos .

IN THE MORGUE

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

WALTER DOWE TOOK THE LAST sheet of the manuscript from his typewriter with a satisfied sigh and leaned back in his chair, turning his face to the ceiling to ease the stiffened muscles of his neck. Then he looked at the clock: 3:15 A.M. He yawned, got to his feet, switched off the lights, and went down the hall to his bedroom.

In the doorway of the bedroom he halted abruptly. The moonlight came through the wide windows to illuminate an empty bed. He turned on the lights and looked around the room. None of the things his wife had worn that night were there. She had not undressed, then; perhaps she had heard the rattle of his typewriter and had decided to wait downstairs until he had finished. She never interrupted him when he was at work, and he was usually too engrossed by his labors to hear her footsteps when she passed his study door.

He went to the head of the stairs and called: "Althea!"

No answer.

He went downstairs, into all the rooms, turning on the lights; he returned to the second floor and did the same. His wife was not in the house. He was perplexed, and a little helpless. Then he remembered that she had gone to the theater with the Schuylers. His hands trembled as he picked up the telephone.

The Schuylers' maid answered his call . . . There had been a fire at the Majestic Theater; neither Mr. nor Mrs. Schuyler had come home. Mr. Schuyler's father had gone out to look for them, but had not returned yet. The maid understood that the fire had been pretty bad . . .

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Dowe was waiting on the sidewalk when the taxicab for which he had telephoned arrived. Fifteen minutes later he was struggling to get through the fire lines, which were still drawn about the theater. A perspiring, red-faced policeman thrust him back.

"You'll find nothing here. The building's been cleared. Everybody's been taken to the hospitals."

Dowe found his cab again and was driven to the City Hospital. He forced his way through the clamoring group on the gray stone steps. A policeman blocked the door. Presently a pasty-faced man, in solid white, spoke over the policeman's shoulder:

"There's no use waiting. We're too busy treating them now to either take their names or let anybody in to see them. We'll try to have a list in the late morning edition; but we can't let anybody in until later in the day."

Dowe turned away. Then he thought: Murray Bornis, of course! He went back to the cab and gave the driver Bornis's address.

Bornis came to the door of his apartment in pajamas. Dowe clung to him.

"Althea went to the Majestic tonight and hasn't come home. They wouldn't let me in at the hospital. Told me to wait—but I can't! You're the police commissioner—you can get me in!"

While Bornis dressed, Dowe paced the floor, babbling. Then he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror, and stood suddenly still. The sight of his distorted face and wild eyes shocked him back into sanity. He was on the verge of hysterics. He must take hold of himself. He must not collapse before he found Althea.

Deliberately, he made himself sit down, made himself stop visualizing Althea's soft, white body charred and crushed. He must think about something else: Bornis, for instance . . .

But that brought him back to his wife in the end. She had never liked Bornis. His frank sensuality, and his unsavory reputation for numerous affairs with numerous women, had offended her strict conception of morality. To be sure, she had always given him all the courtesy due her husband's friend; but it was generally a frigid giving. And Bornis, understanding her attitude, and perhaps a little contemptuous of her narrow views, had been as coolly polite as she. And now she was lying somewhere, moaning in agony, perhaps already cold . . .

Bornis finished dressing and they went quickly to the City Hospital, where the police commissioner and his companion were readily admitted. They walked down long rooms, between rows of groaning and writhing bodies, looking into bruised and burned faces, seeing no one they knew. Then to Mercy Hospital, where they found Sylvia

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Schuyler. She told them that the crush in the theater had separated her from her husband and Althea, and she had not seen them afterward. Then she lapsed into unconsciousness again.

When they got back to the cab, Bornis gave directions to the driver in an undertone, but Dowe did not have to hear them to know what they were: "To the morgue." There was no other place to go.

Now they walked between rows of bodies that were mangled horribly. Dowe had exhausted his feelings: he felt no pity, no loathing, now. He looked into a face; it was not Althea's; then it was nothing; he passed on to the next.

Bornis's fingers closed convulsively around Dowe's arm.

"There! Althea!"

Dowe turned. A face that stampeding leather heels had robbed of features; a torso that was battered and blackened and cut, and from which the clothing had been torn. All that was human of it were the legs; they had somehow escaped disfigurement.

"No, no!" Dowe cried.

He would not believe this begrimed, mangled thing was exquisite white Althea!

Through the horror that for the moment shut Dowe off from the world, Bornis's vibrant, anguished voice penetrated—it was almost a shriek:

"I tell you it is!" Flinging out a hand to point at one smooth knee. "See! The dimple!"

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Time was when "a woman's mystery novel" meant an overcharged romance of premonitions and attic-prowling. Today it's more apt to mean a realistic story with a depth of psychological insight and wisdom which few males can rival. Last month I commended to you such wisewomen as Celia Fremlin, Nina Bawden, Vin Packer and Charlotte Armstrong, and now——

★★★★ **THE LISTENING WALLS, *by Margaret Millar*** (Random, $3.50)
Mexico City and San Francisco furnish backgrounds for one of Millar's shrewdest, most devious entries—a considerable novel of character with a stunningly deceptive suspense plot.

★★★★ **A DREAM OF FALLING, *by Mary O. Rank*** (Houghton Mifflin, $3.50)
New young writer contributes a classic museum specimen of the meeting of the "suspense" and "serious" novels: subtle, perceptive, compellingly plotted portrait of an all but involuntary murderess.

★★★★ **THE FOGGY, FOGGY DEW, *by Charity Blackstock*** (B. B. C., $2.95)
Last year's most impressive discovery happily repeats with a taut story of the rescue of displaced children—a mite more nearly conventional than her other 3 novels, but just as full-dimensioned.

★★★★ **BLOOD AND JUDGMENT, *by Michael Gilbert*** (Harper, $2.95)
Always reliable, ever-experimental Gilbert combines the British police procedure of Marric or Procter with his own knowledge of the law to produce a grand rich book about unorthodox Sergeant Pat Petrella.

★★★ **WHO GOES HANG?, *by Stanley Ryland*** (Dodd, Mead, $2.95)
Fascinating notion of parliamentary inquiry into the presence of an 1859 corpse in Big Ben's tower; despite faults in tempo and solution, the year's find for admirers (like me) of the old-fashioned whodunit.

With science fiction in a slump, some s.f. novels are being aimed at mystery readers, with such labels as "a novel of menace." When they're as good as Philip K. Dick's TIME OUT OF JOINT (Lippincott, $3.50), you shouldn't mind. You may not believe the science-fictional "solution"; but the build-up of near-paranoid suspense is tremendous.

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THE GIRL WHO LIVED DANGEROUSLY

by HUGH PENTECOST

(continued from page 25)

"But you saw the gun yourself!" I said.

She shook her head slowly. Then I remembered she hadn't moved around the desk to look at it when I'd asked her to.

"I believed you," she said, "because Buddy usually did carry a gun."

I knew I had to do some pretty rapid thinking. There'd be a detailed description of me and a city-wide alarm on the tape. Somebody had taken that shoulder holster off Lamar and taken the gun before the cops got there. I thought I knew why.

I looked at Judith. I saw doubt in her eyes.

"I killed Lamar in self-defense," I said. "He had a gun and he pulled it on me, and I hit him with that decanter. I went back to that office to see Lloyd, just as I told you. This Carlo character can testify that I asked for Lloyd. I didn't sneak back there. The reason Carlo can give the cops a detailed description of me is because I was quite open about it. I don't know who took the gun and Lamar's holster. There might be half a dozen reasons *why* it was taken."

"For instance?" Judith asked.

"A man who carries a gun usually has a use for it," I said. "Maybe Lamar killed somebody with it. Maybe the ballistic boys could prove it. Maybe Lloyd wouldn't like that because Lamar did the job for him, so he needed a fall guy. Me."

"You know how to use your head, Jeff, don't you?"

"After tonight I wouldn't go on record."

"It sounds reasonable," she said, "and I think I believe you. What do you want to do?"

"I want to get out of here," I said. "I want to find myself a little elbow room and figure the angles."

"You'd be safe here," she said.

"After that doorman seeing me? And the maid? Listen, Judith, I've got to decide whether I go to the cops and take a chance on their believing my story or wait till I can prove it. Proving it isn't going to be done hiding out somewhere."

"You're going to need help, Jeff."

"I think I know where I can get it," I said.

"Do you want some money?"

"Thanks. Thanks a lot, but I'm heeled. I just want to go, Judith. I want to start things moving."

She came toward me. "Will you keep in touch with me, Jeff? Will you let me know what happens?"

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"I've got an unpleasant hunch you'll be able to read that in the papers," I said. "But I'll call you—because I'm grateful to you."

"Good luck," she said.

I didn't feel safe until I'd walked out through the foyer and past the doorman. Women have been known to change their minds before this.

I walked across town to an all-night drug store on Lexington Avenue. I got myself a couple of bucks' worth of change, went into the phone booth, and called Alan Quist in Vermont. He was one guy I could trust up to the hilt, and, boy! that was something I needed right then.

I sat in the booth, imagining him swearing to himself as he stumbled out of bed in that little cottage of his near the college campus and fumbled for the phone in the hall. Presently I heard his voice.

"Jeff!" he said. "Don't tell me you've taken to drink? Do you realize it's two thirty in the morning?"

"Alan, I'm in a bad jam," I said.

He was instantly serious. "What is it, Jeff?"

"I—I killed a guy tonight, Alan."

His voice was as steady as though I'd told him I had caught a bad head cold. "Have you been arrested?"

"Not yet. It was self-defense, Alan."

"You don't have to tell me that," he said.

"There's an alarm out for me. I'd give myself up, but there is a slight touch of frame-up involved. I've got to figure it just right, and I need help."

"I can leave here in half an hour," Alan said. "It'll take me about six hours to drive to New York. That'll be about nine o'clock. Where can I find you?"

"Lower level information booth at the Grand Central Station," I said.

"I'll be there, Jeff," he said cheerfully. "And keep your shirt on."

Six and a half hours to wait.

If you are being hunted, the best place to hide is in a crowd. But there are no crowds at three in the morning. On the streets are a few cruising taxis, maybe a police car, a few half-empty buses. You might think of riding the subways. But the man who sits opposite you staring into space may be a plainclothes detective on his way home, or a newspaperman. After staring at you a long time, the description he's just got on the police ticker may click in his mind. You can't escape him on a moving train.

If you go to a hotel, without luggage, at three in the morning, the night clerk looks you over carefully and is bound to remember you. There's nothing outstanding about my appearance. It's part of my stock in trade to avoid anything that would be characteristic in the way of dressing. I'm about five feet eight inches tall and I never did run to

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weight. My hair was a light brown when I was younger, and it's still a sort of neutral brownish-gray. My features are regular. My eyes are a sort of hazel color. In a crowd I would look like a hundred other guys you might see around, but alone, with a police alarm out for me, I had a definite problem.

I didn't want to go to the station until the last minute. The places most likely to be carefully watched during the first hours by the police were stations, bus terminals, and airports. I walked out of the drug store, hailed a taxi, and gave the address of a hotel on lower Lexington Avenue. That would at least get me out of the neighborhood.

I was of two minds about Judith Hagan. Either she was just a screwball on the hunt for excitement, or she had some real connection with Lloyd. I was inclined to believe the first idea, but if the second happened to be true it was possible I'd been followed from her apartment house. I wanted to be sure to shake any tail. But on the trip downtown in the taxi, I convinced myself we weren't being followed. She was a strange girl, that Hagan.

At the hotel I went in, pretended to make a phone call from a booth in the lobby, and then went out on the street again. I walked back up Lexington and then turned east toward Third. In a deserted block I discovered an old brownstone house that had been converted into apartments. There was a little foyer with a brass mailbox and name plates, dimly lit by an overhanging bulb. The windows of the house were all unlit. The chances that everyone was home and in bed were pretty good. I went into the foyer, reached up and unscrewed the light bulb, and stood there in the darkness, hunched in one corner. If anyone should come home at this hour I would walk out, as if I were leaving from a late call. If no one came, I would be safe there until daylight.

Three and a half hours later, aching and stiff from standing in one position so long. I walked out into the summer morning. I went uptown to Grand Central and to a barber shop. A shave and a series of hot and cold towels made me feel a little more human. When I left the barber shop I decided to have a cup of coffee while I was waiting for Alan. So I headed for the lunch counter near the entrance to the Lexington Avenue subway. On the way I picked up a newspaper at a stand. It was a tabloid, and splashed all over the front page was *NIGHT CLUB KILLING BAFFLES COPS.*

I sat down on a stool in the lunchoom, ordered coffee, black, and started to read the piece:

"Shortly after midnight last night Buddy Lamar, assistant manager of a night spot known as The Circus Club, was found brutally murdered in the club's private office. His head had been beaten in with a heavy, glass whiskey decanter.

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"Lamar, chief assistant of the well-known Broadway figure, George Lloyd, proprietor of The Circus Club, West 52nd Street night spot, was found lying on the office floor by Lloyd, who promptly notified the police.

"Carlo Ferrari, headwaiter at The Circus Club, provided the police with the description of a man believed to be the killer. This man, Ferrari said, arrived at the club a little after eleven o'clock. He was alone, and after sitting at a corner table for a while he beckoned Ferrari and told him that he wanted to see Lamar."

I read that over again. They were giving out that I'd asked for Lamar, not Lloyd. I thought I understood that. They were trying to tie me directly to the killing, to hint at a motive.

"The suspected killer gave Ferrari a five-dollar tip," the story went on, "to tell him where he could find Lamar. Ferrari had no reason to be suspicious and told the man he would find Lamar in the private office. The man went back to the office, and was not seen again by Ferrari or any other club employee.

"Lamar, though he had a pistol permit, was unarmed. Evidently the attack was totally unexpected, since there was no evidence of any real struggle between Lamar and his killer. So far there is no clear-cut motive evident for the killing. No connection between Lamar and the killer has been discovered. If robbery of the office safe was the motive, the murderer was evidently frightened away before he could do anything about it.

"Ferrari's description of the missing killer follows: about five feet five inches tall; abnormally broad shoulders; black curly hair and black eyes; a small, jagged scar on the left cheek—"

I set down my cup so hard I spilled half the coffee on the counter. "Five feet five—black hair and eyes—scar."

I lowered the paper and looked at myself in the mirror behind the counter. In spite of that unbelievable description I was still me!

I get a little soft in the head when I talk about Alan Quist. I've said it before and I say it again—if I'd ever had a son and he grew up to be like Alan, I'd have said "Thank you!" to Whoever's responsible for those things.

Alan has class sticking out all over him. He is dark and slender and very quiet in his manner. Just a nice modest kid who looks a little like Dana Andrews, the movie actor. But I know, from my association with him, that underneath that easygoing exterior he is hard as a cutting diamond when the going gets rugged. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have in my corner, and when I saw him coming toward me across the station I began to feel warm inside.

When he saw me, a look of con-

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cern in his blue eyes relaxed. "Jeff, you're all right, then!" He gripped my hand hard. "Where can we talk?"

"Had any breakfast?"

"No, but—"

"We can go next door to the Commodore," I said.

One thing I like about Alan, when you've got something to tell him he doesn't crawl all over you with questions before you've started. He waits for you to tell it in your own way and in your own time.

We got a corner table in the dining room and ordered breakfast. It wasn't until the waiter had gone away that I began to tell him the story. He leaned back in his chair, took a flat silver case out of his pocket, picked a cigarette out of it and lit it. He listened, and you couldn't tell what his reactions were from anything that showed on his face or in his eyes.

He interrupted me three times in the telling. He asked me if I believed Joe Tamarak's story. I said I did.

He asked me if I'd noticed Lamar particularly when I saw him in the midway before the shooting. I told him no.

He asked me if I remembered now who the man was in the picture with Judith and the swordfish. I said I didn't.

"I have the feeling," I told him, "that I never really saw the guy before, only another picture of him. It isn't a memory I seem to associate with anything in my life. You think it's important?"

"It's just unexplained," Alan said. "The Hagan girl is apparently extremely rich. Her father must have been prominent in some field. Perhaps you did see his picture somewhere."

I got right down to the end, about leaving Judith's and calling him. Then I showed him the tabloid which I had folded up in my pocket. When he came to the end of the story his lips puckered in a soundless whistle.

"So that's why you felt it was safe to move about so openly!" He signaled for the waiter to bring us a fresh pot of coffee. "Mr. Lloyd doesn't seem to want the police to catch you, Jeff. Why do you suppose he feels that way?"

"I have the unpleasant notion that he may want to polish me off himself," I said.

Alan didn't comment on that. He lit a fresh cigarette and sat there, scowling at that phony description in the paper. "It doesn't fit, Jeff."

"What doesn't fit?"

"Lloyd has a racket that depends on his staying out of trouble—clipping the rich suckers in New York and Hollywood. The last thing in the world he wants to risk is getting mixed up in a murder. That eight thousand dollars Tamarak took him for is chicken feed. Why have him killed and risk being connected with it?"

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"I don't know the answer to that, Alan, but he did have him killed."

"Let's keep our thinking as straight as we can," Alan said. "Lamar killed Tamarak. Lamar was Lloyd's boy. But we don't *know* that Lloyd ordered the killing."

"But Lamar wouldn't act without—"

"We don't know what he'd do, Jeff. We do know that you killed Lamar, and that Lloyd had a perfect description of you from Carlo, the headwaiter, but that he gave the police a phony description instead. Why? It's almost like a public invitation to you to show your hand."

Alan stared at me for a moment, and then brought his hand down on the table so that the coffee cups jiggled. "I think I've got it, Jeff. Lloyd wasn't in the club last night when you asked for him. It was Lamar's job to front for Lloyd at the club. Lloyd's a big shot, in his own way. He wouldn't see every character in the place who asked for him. Half of them would want to cash checks, or get permission to sign a tab—ordinary business routine."

"That's right," I said.

"This Carlo, the headwaiter, didn't know you. You asked for Lloyd. He went out back and told Lamar. He probably pointed you out to him. Lamar instantly recognized you as the operator of the Skill-O game at the carnival. He got the wind up. He told Carlo to send you into the office. Now, here's the crux of it, Jeff: he wouldn't tell Carlo why, would he? Unless Carlo is part of Lloyd's inner circle."

"No, he wouldn't."

"So Lamar doesn't tell anyone about you, Jeff. He sends for you, with the intention of getting rid of you. You were too quick for him, and he died—he died *without ever telling anyone about you.*"

"Where does that get us?"

"Lloyd doesn't know why you killed Lamar, Jeff," Alan said. "That must give him the willies. He doesn't know if you had a private feud with Lamar, or if it had something to do with his own affairs. You see, Jeff? Lloyd doesn't know if you've got something on him or not. And he doesn't want you to talk to the police before he knows the answers."

"Say, that could be!" I said.

"He's leaving the way open to make a deal with you, in case you do have something on him."

"What kind of deal?"

"He's waiting for you to show your hand," Alan said.

"Yes, but what is my hand?" I said. "I was really nosing around to find out who killed Tamarak and why. I found out! That leaves me holding the bag two ways. If I tell Lloyd that, he may decide he's better off with me permanently silent. If I go to the cops—"

"Let's add that up," Alan said. "You go to the police and tell them exactly what happened. What then?"

"There isn't any gun, so my story

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of cracking him with the decanter in self-defense won't hold up. You have to remember one thing, Alan —I'm a hustler. That's two strikes against me before I start talking. Unless I can get my hands on Lamar's gun, unless I can find some other witness from the carnival who saw Lamar there, the police aren't going to go for my story."

"There might be another out," he said slowly. "It's a little cockeyed, but it might work."

As he told me his idea I decided "cockeyed" was a wild understatement. I was to get in touch with Lloyd, perhaps directly, perhaps through Judith—who seemed to be on pretty good terms with him—and tell him the same story I had told her: That I didn't know Lamar; that I didn't know why he pulled the gun on me; that I acted in self-defense. If Lloyd went for that we were in.

"Up to our necks," I said sourly.

"That's where we are if we don't do anything," Alan said. "What have we got to lose?"

I had to admit we didn't have much. If I could arrange to meet Lloyd on my ground, it might work. But then what?

Alan had an answer for that, and what an answer!

"You tell Lloyd the real reason you wanted to see him," he said.

"I do? What was it?"

"You tell him you have a sucker, a big-time oil man from the West. You tell him this sucker is in New York, and that he's a crazy gambler. You tell him it was your idea to get him in a game, let him be taken by Lloyd. That in return for producing him you want a cut of the take."

"That's what Joe Tamarak did."

"Precisely."

"And there isn't any oil man from Oklahoma."

"But there is," Alan grinned. "Me."

"Okay, get me the paper dolls and the scissors," I said.

Alan laughed outright. "Listen," he said. "Your only chance of getting out of this mess is to prove that Lamar killed Tamarak, and that he was armed and prepared to kill you when you slugged him with that decanter. Lloyd's got you on the hip right now. His trade is to his advantage, not yours. You keep quiet about Tamarak's murder and he'll keep quiet about you. But that leaves you under his thumb, and always running the risk of being picked up by the police and being given a one-way ticket to the chair on circumstantial evidence."

"Merry Christmas," I said.

"But if you held the trumps *you* could make a trade, and get the evidence you need to prove self-defense. That's where the Oklahoma oil man comes in. If we can whet Lloyd's appetite and get him into a game with this supposed sucker, and then catch him cold at his manipulations with the cards . . ."

The idea began to take shape for me. Lloyd had a cushy racket. If his

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foot slipped and there was a public exposure, he'd be done for keeps. He'd go a long way to prevent that.

"If you and I, knowing all we do about cards, can't catch Lloyd red-handed," Alan said, "then we deserve whatever happens to us. But it's got to be in a real game, and there's got to be at least one disinterested witness in it." Alan leaned back, watching me for a reaction.

"How do we get Lloyd to reverse himself about Lamar being armed?"

"Let him sweat that out," Alan said. "He'll find a way if his racket is at stake."

"How do we make the oil man stand up?"

"Duck soup," Alan said. "Grant Simon, who writes a Broadway column in the *Globe,* was in my squadron overseas. I think I could get him to print a couple of items in his paper about Alan Quist, the oil tycoon from Oklahoma."

"Newspapermen don't print phony items in their columns just to be chummy," I said.

"Not to break a murder case, and perhaps unearth a story of how dozens of celebrities have been swindled out of hundreds of thousands of dollars?"

I sighed. "How good is your Oklahoma drawl?" I asked Alan.

Did you ever cross a brook by stepping on a series of wobbly stones, not knowing which one may turn over and land you in the drink? That's a little bit the way I felt about Alan's plan. The first step out into uncertainty involved getting in touch with Lloyd. Would he go for the story or was he just waiting to do a private job on me? But if that held up, what about Judith? Could we trust her or not? If we could, she would be no end of help, but if we guessed wrong we were licked before we started. Third step, could we make the Oklahoma oil man stand up? If Lloyd discovered in the middle of things that Alan was a fake and that we were setting a trap for him we couldn't expect any quarter. Finally, suppose we couldn't catch him out in his manipulations with the cards. Why, then we'd owe him a bunch of money we couldn't pay, and welchers aren't popular in the gambling world.

Judith, we felt, was the key to this thing. If we could get to Lloyd through her, our chances were better. From what I knew of her character I figured she'd go for anything that involved danger, unless she was all the way on Lloyd's team. Then we'd just be playing into her hands if we told her the whole pitch.

Without seeing her, Alan was against this. "Tell her the story we've invented for Lloyd," he said. "Let her think I *am* being trimmed."

We mapped the plan out very carefully. Alan was to get in touch with his friend Grant Simon and

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plant something about the oil tycoon in the paper. He was also to get himself a suite at one of the expensive hotels, to make the background look legitimate.

Judith was to be my dish.

It was about noon when I called her from a phone booth in the station.

"Jeff, darling!" she cried. "Where are you?"

"Pay phone," I told her. "Did you see the morning papers?"

"Jeff, they're incredible! That description!"

"Could I see you?" I asked her.

"But of course, Jeff. When, where?"

I wasn't for walking into any carefully prepared traps. "Grand Central information booth," I suggested. "Upper level."

"In twenty minutes," she said.

Alan and I took some simple precautions. At twenty minutes past twelve I sauntered up to the information booth. Alan took up a position over by the ticket windows. If Judith came alone, fine. If she was playing Lloyd's side of the street and she brought someone along with her, I wouldn't be facing it by myself.

I saw her long before she saw me. She came down the steps at the Vanderbilt Avenue end of the station. She had on a white sharkskin suit with a raspberry-colored blouse and a tiny hat of the same color on the side of her dark head. She went for jewelry in the daytime, too. She was loaded down with hammered silver bracelets with little doodads hanging from them, and on her left hand was a ring with a huge blood-red stone in it. Every guy she passed between the bottom of the stairs and me turned to look at her.

I had my own eyes peeled for anyone trailing along in her wake. If she had anybody with her it was impossible to pick him out in the crowd.

She came straight up to me with both hands held out in greeting. Her eyes were brimming with excitement. "Jeff!"

"Hi," I said.

"Where can we talk?" she asked, and looked around her like a lady spy in a movie.

"You got any ideas?" I asked her.

"Pomeroy's," she said promptly. "It's a restaurant just up the street on Lexington."

I wasn't going to any place she chose, just in case. "Too fancy," I said. "We should be able to find a quiet little dive over on Third Avenue somewhere."

"All right, Jeff. Let's go." If she meant Pomeroy's as a plant she certainly gave in easily.

We walked within three feet of Alan, but he had his back turned to us and he didn't give me any kind of a sign. We went out of the station and over to Third. I picked out a saloon that had a row of booths at the back. Judith created quite a sensation with the barflies as we walked past them to the rear. A

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waiter in a dirty apron took our order—a Martini for Judith and a cup of coffee for me.

"You know Lloyd," I said, when we were alone. "Why do you suppose he kept the police off me?"

"Jeff, I've been thinking and thinking all morning," she said earnestly, "and I just can't figure it."

"It's like he was inviting me to make the next move," I said.

"You haven't been to the police?"

"Would I be here if I had? Judith, I want to see Lloyd. Do you suppose you could fix it?"

"But, Jeff, isn't that dangerous? Maybe that's just what he wants."

"I want to meet him without his knowing it's going to happen," I said. "Suppose you asked him over to your house for a drink. He'd come, wouldn't he?"

She smiled at me. "It's possible," she said.

"Well, suppose you ask him over. Have you told him what really happened last night?"

"Good Lord, no!" she said.

"All right. I'll be there when he arrives. We'll tell him exactly what happened and see what his hand is. Are you game?"

"You're running the risk, Jeff, not me," she said.

"He might not like it that you helped me last night."

"But if I produce you for him now . . . When do you want to set it up for?"

"The sooner the better."

She looked around her. "There's a phone booth over there. I'll call him now."

She didn't object when I walked over to the booth with her. She dialed a number and got Lloyd directly. I made a note of that number in my head. She was all sweetness over the phone. She made the date for four o'clock, and from what I could hear of Lloyd's voice he was a very happy guy.

It wasn't my idea to give her the chance to tip him off if I could help it. I invited her to lunch. She seemed delighted. She even suggested that after lunch we could go back to her place and set the stage for the meeting with Lloyd. I began to stop worrying about her. I asked her where she'd like to have lunch, and she suggested three or four places over in the Park Avenue area. I picked one out of the hat and we walked across town.

The restaurant was one of those little Italian places which look simple and unpretentious and where lunch costs you about the equivalent of three weeks' pay for a high-salaried executive. The proprietor knew Judith and made a great fuss over her.

"Could we have that corner booth, Mario?" she asked him.

"Anything you like, Mrs. Hagan. The place is yours."

She ordered another Martini, and Mario went off to make it "with his own hands."

"What's the Mrs. Hagan racket?" I asked. "His way of making an

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honest woman of you?"

Her face clouded for just an instant. "I am Mrs. Hagan, Jeff."

That was something of a surprise. "And Mr. Hagan?" I asked her.

"He was killed," she said.

"Oh," I said. "The war?"

"No." She let it lie there for a minute, then she looked at me very directly. "You can easily find out the story, Jeff, if you're interested. My husband shot himself. In the second week of our honeymoon."

"Oh," I said. "That's a tough break."

I found myself fumbling around with small talk after that jolly little revelation. It was Judith, however, who straightened things away. After she'd taken half of her Martini at a gulp she seemed to pull herself together. She started talking about the coming meeting with Lloyd. But she didn't get very far, because we were interrupted.

"Jeff!" a familiar voice said.

I hadn't seen Alan come in, but he was standing by our booth, smiling down at me.

"I've been trying to get hold of you all day," Alan said, and his eyes turned appreciatively to Judith.

I introduced them, wondering what Alan's play was, feeling my way cautiously. Judith suggested he join us for a drink, and he sat down beside me, never taking his eyes off her.

"I was about to bawl you out, Jeff, for not producing a little excitement," he said, "but now I take it all back."

Mario came over and took his order for a Calvert and soda.

"Jeff's been promising to find me a big-time poker game," Alan said to Judith. I breathed easier because I knew now how he wanted it played. "He promised me three days ago, and then he just disappeared."

"You like to play cards?" Judith asked.

Alan grinned. "Not socially," he said. "But when it's for blood it's about as much fun as anything I know."

"You've found a partner in crime," I said. "I understand Judith plays in your league."

"Really?" Alan said eagerly.

Judith laughed. "I usually supply the blood," she said. "How do you earn the money to lose at poker, Mr. Quist?"

"I don't always lose," he said. "I'm in the oil business, Mrs. Hagan. Oklahoma. I've got a pipe line running right from my wells to the bank." He sounded very boyish, very real.

"Have you known Jeff a long time?" she asked.

"About six months, isn't it, Jeff? We met out in the oil fields last winter. Jeff promised when I came to New York he had connections that would get me into a really big game. I'm spoiling for trouble, Mrs. Hagan. Maybe you'd take over?"

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"Not me," Judith said. "I'd watch you take your beating, Mr. Quist, but I wouldn't arrange it, even if I could."

"The lady doesn't have much confidence in me, Jeff."

"She doesn't know you," I said.

Judith gave me an odd look over the rim of her cocktail glass. "Maybe she knows you better than you think," she said to Alan.

Of course, Alan had lunch with us. He drew Judith out skillfully about her interest in dangerous sports. As a pilot overseas in the war he'd seen a lot of places in Europe where she'd been. You got a pretty clear picture of her endless and restless search for dangerous ways to work off her energy. I could see she was taken with him, and he certainly gave off the impression that he thought she was about the most fascinating girl he'd ever met.

At last Judith suggested to me that we'd better get moving.

Alan protested. "I'm not going to let you go now," he said.

"I wish we didn't have to go, Alan," she said. They'd got down to first names. "But Jeff and I have an appointment."

"How about later?" he urged. "Dinner? The three of us. And then we'll do the town."

She smiled at him. "All right," she said. "Suppose you and Jeff meet me at my place about seven. We'll have a drink there and then you can take the wheel."

"Wonderful," Alan said. "At seven!" Then he turned to me. "That doesn't mean I'm not holding you to your promise, Jeff. Find me that poker game."

"You're the doctor," I said.

Judith and I went out and hailed a taxi. She didn't say anything for several blocks, and then she looked at me, frowning.

"Jeff, I don't think I like you as much as I did," she said.

"What have I done?"

"I don't think you told me the whole truth last night."

"What are you talking about?" I said, really puzzled.

"You told me you went to see Lloyd last night in the hope he might have work for you. I think you had something else in mind. You were going to offer Alan Quist for a killing, cutting yourself in on the take."

I had to fight hard to keep from laughing. She'd fallen for it just the way we'd hoped.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "The kid's lousy with money. It won't hurt him to lose some of it. It might even do him good. Teach him to be a little more cautious."

"You know he can't win in a game with Lloyd," she said.

I tried to sound tough, fighting back the urge to laugh all the time. "Look, the guy's money bubbles up out of the ground," I said. "If we take him for all he's got, there'll be more tomorrow. He can't really lose in the long run." It seemed a

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pity to string her along, but it was better she shouldn't know the truth or she might tip our hand if we did get in a game with Lloyd.

"Jeff I've got half a mind to tell Alan what you're up to," she said.

"Say, you really took a header for him, didn't you?"

She turned away from me again. "Once things were different," she said. "Once I used to get pleasure out of people that aren't heels—like you and me, Jeff."

At five minutes to four I noticed that the palms of my hands were damp. Judith and I were sitting in the little private bar in her apartment, waiting for Lloyd. This was the big hurdle, and I knew it. There was the unpleasant possibility that I wasn't going to be able to talk fast enough to see it through.

At four on the dot the French maid announced, "Mr. Lloyd."

I don't quite know what I expected. Judith went over to greet him, and I had a moment to look him over before I actually came to grips with him.

He was tall and blond and tanned a golden brown. His features were regular and might have been chiseled by one of those old-time Greek boys. The blue gabardine suit he was wearing must have set him back a couple of hundred clams, estimating low. He had on blue suède sport shoes and a pair of yellow chamois gloves that matched the color of his hair. He was theatrical-looking, but it came out cold, if you know what I mean. No extra gestures, no gushing.

He saw me at once. When he turned his eyes to me they turned out to be the palest blue I had ever seen, with that curious hooded look gamblers get from working under bright lights. He had started to peel off one of the yellow gloves, but suddenly his hands were still.

"George, this is Jeff Larigan," Judith said.

"You sent for me to meet him?" Lloyd said, without looking away from me.

"Yes, George."

"You could have told me."

"There were reasons, George."

"Yes?" He dropped his hands to his sides without removing the gloves.

Judith slipped her arm through his and started to lead him over to the table where I was standing. He gently disengaged her arm, but he came over to the table with her.

"We might as well start honest," I said. "I killed Buddy Lamar last night."

Not a muscle in his face moved, not even a flicker of the eyelids. "I wondered if it was you," he said.

"I have to make a confession, too," Judith said. "I helped Jeff get away last night. He was here when you phoned me. By then I'd come to believe his story, so—"

If she expected him to say something she was disappointed.

"When I read the description you

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gave out to the cops," I said, "I figured we ought to get together. Judith agreed to arrange it."

Still he didn't speak.

"George, if you'll just listen to Jeff's story—" Judith began.

He spoke in that flat voice, "You asked for me at The Circus Club last night. What did you want?"

"I—I had a proposition for you."

"Yes?"

"I've been a hustler all my life, Lloyd. I picked up a sucker out West about six months ago. It was too big a job for me to swing alone. It was my idea to deliver him to you—for a piece of the profit."

"Why me?" Lloyd said.

"You were recommended to me as a smart operator."

"By whom?"

I had to pull that one out of the hat fast. "The Mountain," I said, and it was partly true.

"Where is the sucker now?"

"Here, in New York. He's screaming for a chance to be taken. Judith can vouch for that. She met him today."

"It's true, George," Judith said.

I thought I could look anyone straight in the eye, but those unblinking pale blue gimlets were too much for me.

"Why didn't you go to the police?" Lloyd asked.

"After you took Lamar's gun from the place I had no chance to cop a plea of self-defense."

"Why do you think I took the gun?"

I swallowed hard. "You wanted it to look like a stick-up. You didn't want it connected with you."

"Why do you think I gave the police a false description of you?"

"Because you wanted them out of your hair. In your business you can't afford it. If you described me they might have found me, and then been back in your hair with questions. This way, they'll be looking for the next five years for somebody who doesn't exist."

He was silent for a moment. "Why do you think I'll let you get away with killing one of my men?"

"The guy was trigger-happy," I said. "I never saw him before in my life, but he pulled a gun on me. Maybe you're better off with him out of the way."

"Why did he pull the gun?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said, "and I could invent a better answer than that, but I want to play this on the level with you. I've still got that sucker."

"There has to be an explanation."

"Look," I said, and I knew everything might hang on my answer. "I've worked boats and gambling houses all over the world. Maybe Lamar was in one of those games. Could I remember every face I ever saw around a crap table? Maybe he figured I took him some time. Maybe I did. It was my business. But I don't remember ever seeing him. The only way I can figure it is that way—and that he was a hothead who wanted to pay me off."

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I could hear the faint buzz of the little electric clock behind the bar in the long silence that followed.

At last Lloyd spoke again, "When does this sucker of yours want to play?"

My knees nearly buckled under me, and I could feel my shirt sticking damply to my back. It looked like I'd made it.

That wasn't all there was to it, but I was over the hump. Lloyd asked me questions about Alan and about me. Then he told me that he would arrange a game for the following night, provided his personal checking on the situation was satisfactory. The game would be held in a private suite at the Hotel Kendall. We would arrive there at ten o'clock to begin play. My share, for producing Alan, was to be thirty per cent.

He asked Judith if she'd like to sit in, and she said, rather reluctantly I thought, that she would. Finally, he left us.

I sat down kind of hard at the table and pulled out my handkerchief. I went through the motions of mopping my forehead. It was an act to cover up the fact that Mr. George Lloyd had really had me going. If he was half as good at concealing what he did with cards as he was at concealing his emotions, he was going to be a tough nut to crack.

Judith went off to dress for dinner, leaving me to amuse myself till Alan got there. He showed a proper eagerness by arriving at a quarter to seven. We were alone in the bar, but we didn't do any private talking. No telling who might be listening. I told him, as though he really was the sucker from Oklahoma, that I'd managed to arrange a game for the next evening. He indicated enthusiasm.

He was looking at Judith's picture gallery when she came in. She was wearing a filmy evening dress the color of green chartreuse. I figure she must have a million bucks' worth of jewelry, because she was loaded down again with bracelets and rings—a whole new set, including an egg-sized emerald.

She made drinks for Alan and herself, and then he demanded a Cook's tour of the pictures.

"Who's the man in the picture with the fish?" he asked finally.

"My father," she said.

"Who was he? He's distinguished-looking," Alan said.

"His name," she said slowly, "was Max Barretto."

It's just possible that didn't mean anything to Alan. He acted as though it didn't. But Max Barretto! Anybody who knew anything about professional gambling back in the twenties knew Max Barretto. He'd been as big as Rothstein. And he wound up behind the eight ball like Rothstein, too. They said he was framed, but in any case he went to the penitentiary in Atlanta, where he died. They said he cracked up and that he was in a strait jacket in the mental ward at the end.

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I looked at Judith and saw the faint quiver of her lips. Poor kid. She'd got it from all angles. First her father and then her husband. No wonder she followed the pattern she did. Max Barretto explained one other thing. They'd said of him that he'd made a terrific killing in the business. Even the fines the Government had slapped on him for income tax evasion had left Judith well heeled.

We put in quite an evening. Dinner at a famous French restaurant; down to the Village to hear Eddie Condon's hot music; and then a series of joints till nearly four in the morning. After dinner I might just as well have been part of the fixtures for all the attention I got from either of them. They talked together; they danced together. They made one hell of a handsome couple, I kept thinking. Underneath, Alan had the same craving for excitement and adventure that she had, only he had decided on the direction his life was going. She was just bouncing around like dice in a box, going nowhere.

Around four, we hit a small joint on the East Side where the proprietor knew Alan. It seemed Alan had phoned him we were coming and tipped him off to the "oil" story. Before long I discovered this guy had been a member of the ground crew at the field where Alan had been stationed in England. It was old home week. They locked up the place, and there was nobody but us and Alan's pal. There was a small piano in back, and Alan sat down and began to play some old army songs. He and his pal sang. I joined in on some of them I knew. Finally the proprietor left to attend to closing-up.

Alan plays the piano really well when he wants to, and he sat at the piano now, playing some of the classical stuff he loved, soft and easy. Judith pulled up a chair close to him.

After the night before I was just about done in. I must have dozed off, because when I opened my eyes again the music had stopped. I could hear the soft murmuring of their voices. Judith was the first one to come clear to me.

"Please, *please,* Alan, don't play in that game tomorrow night," she was saying.

"Don't be foolish, darling," he said, laughing. "I can take care of myself."

"You don't understand, Alan."

"What don't I understand?"

"Jeff isn't on the level with you," she said. "You're being set up for a killing, Alan. You haven't got a chance."

Alan was still laughing. "Maybe Jeff isn't as smart as he thinks he is. If he and Lloyd are good enough to trim me, Judith, I deserve it."

"Oh, Alan!" Her voice broke and it sounded as though she was crying.

"What is it, Judith? Judith!" He sounded startled.

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"I know it sounds crazy," she said. "We've only known each other a day! But don't leave me, Alan. It's been so long since anyone—anyone could possibly mean anything to me. Please, *please!*"

I turned my head just in time to see her wind her arms around his neck and plant her lips against his. She clung to him as though he were her last hope in the world.

It was daylight when we dropped her at her apartment and went back to Alan's hotel suite.

Alan wasn't happy. "I felt like a heel," he said, "not telling her what was up. But it might not have been safe for her to know. She might tip it, somehow."

"This Lloyd is big-league," I said. "You played it smart. She's running enough risk as it is."

"She's been badly hurt," Alan said. "She told me about her father. Did you know?"

"Sure, as soon as she mentioned his name. Of course I'd seen pictures of him years ago, at his trial. That's why I remembered, but I didn't place it in that setting."

"Her husband, too."

"Yeah. Tough," I said.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly. "I wish—"

"What?"

"Skip it," he said.

When I hit the hay I really slept. Just before I passed out, Alan told me Judith had asked him to her apartment for dinner the following night. Just the two of them. I was to pick them up there about nine thirty, and we'd go on from there to the Kendall and the card game.

It was nearly six o'clock in the evening when I woke up. There was a note for me on the bedside table from Alan, saying he'd see me at Judith's at nine thirty. Pinned to the note was a newspaper clipping. It was from Grant Simon's column in the *Globe:*

"Headwaiters at the local niteries are actually smiling the last couple of evenings. It may have something to do with the presence in town of Alan Quist, young oil tycoon, who is said to pass out hundred-dollar tips as casually as though they were Confederate money."

That was smart. Not too detailed. Just enough to make Alan seem real to George Lloyd over his breakfast coffee. I certainly hoped it had.

I soaked in a hot bath, shaved, and went out to find myself some dinner. I was just walking down the front steps of the hotel when a dirty-faced kid approached me.

"You Mr. Larigan?" he asked.

"That's right," I said, startled.

He reached out a grimy paw and pushed a piece of paper into my hand. He went racing off before I could ask him anything. I looked at the paper. It had been torn off a pad. There were three words scrawled on it: *See me. Urgent.*

(continued on page 123)

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**LORD DUNSANY**
TITLE:	***Three Men in a Garden***
TYPE:	Crime and Detection
DETECTIVE:	Anonymous
LOCALE:	A suburb of Dublin, Ireland
TIME:	In a year long past
COMMENTS:	*One of the last tales Lord Dunsany wrote before his death . . . If you want to enjoy Dunsanyana to the fullest, you must be prepared to suspend disbelief—but isn't suspension of disbelief easy these days?*

WHEN I FEEL LIKE READING A detective story, as I suppose most of us often do, I usually read it in the ordinary way—in a book; but sometimes I get a taste for having the story raw—uncooked by any printer, as it were. Then I take a walk along a road that I know, which brings me past a garden in Surrey; and if I choose the right time of day, preferably on a summer's evening, I am likely to find an old detective of my acquaintance, working among his bean rows, of which he is very fond, or doing a little digging, or hacking away his weeds.

Then I have only to lean over his wooden paling a while, and, if he is not too busy, he will lean on his spade or on his hoe, and begin to talk reminiscently. If he just says, "Good evening," I will know by the nod of his head that he has too much work to do among his weeds, or with his digging, to spare much breath for more than politeness; and then, with a nod of my head, I go on my way. But if I find him among his bean rows, where the work seems lighter, and if it is a nice warm golden evening, he will be pretty sure to talk—and so I get my detective story raw. Very likely it will come out of years long past, so that it will be a tale that has long

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been forgotten, and so all the fresher to me.

One evening, leaning over his paling, I said after I had admired his beans, "What is the strangest case you ever investigated?"

"The strangest?" he said almost at once. "Well, the strangest was when they found a body in a garden—in an Irish garden, it was—and it puzzled them a good deal over there. They asked if one of us would go over and lend a hand; and that was me. It was a lovely little garden in a suburb of Dublin, all full of crocuses, for it was spring, and they had found this body lying on the grass among the clumps of crocuses, shot through the heart."

Of course he began at the end, when he first saw the garden, and then told me bits of evidence by which he pieced it all together, and so got back to the beginning—which is not a very good way to tell a story. So I will tell it as it finally unfolded to me . . .

Television was quite new at the time these things happened, and the TV company that was run by the man Straeger was a very little organization then—nothing like what it has grown to now; in fact, I think he was working then for motion pictures although his ambitions were toward TV.

One day Straeger went over to Ireland from the United States and his eyes were blazing with a new idea. He went to see a certain James Maloney, to whom he had some sort of letter of introduction. Straeger rang his bell, was asked in, and told Maloney about his new project—that Maloney should play in a film to be especially made for television. And Maloney said that he had never acted in his life.

"All the better," said Straeger. "You'll be absolutely fresh."

Apparently little details like whether a man could act or not didn't trouble this man Straeger. All he thought about was his wonderful new and original idea. There has been something like it since—a native being killed by a lion in East Africa, and a few other things, but it was absolutely new then.

"You needn't be able to act, my boy," he said to James Maloney. "It is only the wonderful thing you have to do, which has never been done on films before."

"And what's that?" said Maloney.

"Shoot a man," said Straeger.

"Nothing new in that," said Maloney. "I have seen it hundreds of times in films."

"Pooh," said Straeger. "You mean *pretending* to shoot a man—only a blank cartridge in the gun, no real bullet, and then somebody hitting the floor with a big hammer, and the man who was shot falling back onto a sofa. But my stunt is the real thing."

"You mean, shoot him dead?" said Maloney.

"Yes, dead," said Straeger.

"But I wouldn't like to do that to any man," said Maloney.

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"Now, see here," said Straeger. "I've got all this worked out. He'll be a man that doesn't much matter in any way. And we'll compensate all concerned – his whole family. And we'll compensate them well, extremely well. Everything will be on us, so don't you worry about it."

"But that would be murder," said Maloney. "And I should be hanged."

"Now, don't go running away with fancy ideas," said Straeger. "We have everything worked out – every detail. To begin with, they don't hang in the country in whose territory it is going to be filmed."

"But I don't want to leave Ireland," said Maloney. "I've got a bit of farming to do here, and one thing and another . . ."

"Now don't you bother about one thing and another," said Straeger, "nor your farming either. Nobody is going to ask you to leave Ireland."

"But I thought you said–" began Maloney.

"And so I did," replied Straeger. "But have you ever heard of extraterritoriality and diplomatic immunity?"

"And what are they?" asked Maloney.

Well, that kind of thing was all new to Maloney, as they hadn't had legations in Ireland for very long then. Mr. Straeger explained it all and told Maloney that the film was to be shot only half a mile from where they were talking in Maloney's house. It was to be filmed in the garden of the Eldoradoan legation. (I have found out that there is no such country as Eldorado now, but he insisted on calling it that all through his story.)

Well, Straeger was a smart businessman and he not only explained extraterritoriality to Maloney, but got him to understand it; and Straeger added that since there was no extradition treaty between Eldorado and Ireland, the moment Maloney stepped out of that garden he would be free from any legal proceedings whatever – that is, so long as he kept away from Eldorado.

I never heard why Straeger chose Maloney to act in a film. Perhaps he may have been the only Irishman that Straeger knew. But chiefly he was so excited over his new idea of killing a man in cold blood, directly on film, that he didn't bother much about whom he got to do it. And when he had talked away the natural decent feelings of Maloney, so that there was no longer too much resistance to his mad scheme, Straeger began to flutter the dollars before Maloney's eyes – not the actual dollars, but easy talk about thousands and thousands of them; and so he got Maloney.

On the appointed day the two of them went to this garden and met the man who was to be shot, a little man named Hennessey whom they found waiting for them

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just inside the garden, as Straeger had arranged. Straeger and Maloney entered through a little gate in the side of the garden and joined Hennessey, who looked like a man who had been a bit too fond of his drinks for the last few years; and of course he would have got all the drinks he wanted from the film producer.

Straeger had explained to Maloney that Hennessey was married and had two children, but when Maloney began to protest, Straeger repeated, "Everything will be on us—don't you worry about it." Maloney was naturally puzzled at seeing Hennessey there, apparently waiting to be shot—just as puzzled as he would have been to see a sheep walking into a butcher's shop all by itself. But Straeger took him aside and explained that Hennessey was a very simple fellow who thought it was all to be done with a blank cartridge; and his family knew nothing about it except that they were to be well paid. "And so they will be," added Straeger, "very well paid."

The house seemed all shut up—as a matter of fact, it was. There were just these three men in the garden, and nobody else about.

Well, to begin with, it wasn't really the garden of a legation at all—Eldorado's or any other country's. Straeger had just picked a garden whose owners he knew to be away, and Maloney had taken his word for it. Either Maloney must have been a bit of a fool, or Straeger must have been particularly sharp at salesmanship—or perhaps a bit of each.

Well, there they were, the three of them in a garden among the crocuses. And then Straeger set up his camera and pulled out his script and stood Maloney just where he wanted him, saying to him again, "The expenses are all on us." He was just handing him the revolver when Hennessey said suddenly, "No. I'll take that." And before Straeger realized what he was doing, he handed Hennessey the gun. And whether Hennessey was drunk or sober, his mind seemed suddenly illuminated by a clear view of the whole situation. Probably Straeger had let him have one drink too many—too many for Straeger, I mean; and it had revealed Straeger's little game in a flash.

And during that flash Hennessey was not the fool Straeger had calculated him to be. For without saying another word Hennessey shot Straeger dead. Then he and Maloney, having the same dominant interest, which was to leave the premises at once, got into Straeger's car, waiting outside, and drove off as fast as they could. So it was Straeger's body they found lying among the crocuses...

"Yes," said the old detective, "that was by far the strangest case I ever investigated. I never really did understand it."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **C. B. GILFORD**

TITLE: ***Widow's Mite***

TYPE: Fraud and Deception

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Mrs. Harriet Owen, 70 years young, had a Big Idea, and she had the audacity to face the world with it—and, if necessary, the police . . . Poor frail old Mrs. Owen!*

INTO THE MIND OF MRS. HARRIET Owen had been born the grandest Idea—an Idea so audacious, so completely foreign to her gentle nature, that it fairly took her breath away. For this Idea of hers involved fraud—and she had never done a criminal thing in all her life.

Considerations of crime—and of punishment—paralyzed Mrs. Owen's mind for the first three days after the Idea occurred to her. It was the only aspect of the Idea that she could think about for a time. Then gradually she got used to it, and began to consider the Idea's brighter side.

One can't have everything in this life, she told herself finally. One has to choose what one values the most. The notion of being sent to jail wasn't pleasant, but one can't live forever, can one? And when one has just turned seventy, as Mrs. Owen had, risking imprisonment isn't quite the same as it might be for a younger person. Especially life imprisonment.

So the choice was really simple—a long span of declining years spent rather shabbily—or "living it up" for just a little while and taking one's chances. Mrs. Owen smiled to herself one day and made the choice: she would "live it up."

That very day, therefore, she donned her most presentable gown, a black silk—actually the one she had worn to her husband's funeral six years before. Her hat was black too, but it sported gay blue and yellow ribbons. The bright colors symbolized Mrs. Owen's spirits that day. She was feeling very chipper.

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First, she went to the bank. There she visited the safety deposit vault first, and was handed her box. In the privacy of a little opaque-glass-doored room, she opened the box and took out all it contained—a two-inch-thick bundle of engraved documents.

Mrs. Owen smiled as she felt the weight of the paper in her hands. The thought of Albert, her dear departed husband, crossed her mind. She spoke to him in that cozy little cubicle, spoke to him as she often did in the aloneness of her rented furnished room. It was only a whisper, but it was gentle and grateful.

"Dear, dear Albert. How often I scolded you about buying these things, didn't I? 'Albanian bonds, of all things. So you bought them at a discount. A great bargain indeed! You paid that con man five hundred dollars, you say, and their face value is half a million? So they've got a lot of zeroes printed on them, but they're not worth a red cent.'" She paused, her smile becoming a little chuckle. "What foresight you had, Albert dear! We'd have spent that five hundred dollars some way or other. I wouldn't have it now, that's for sure. But these Albanian bonds are going to keep me for the rest of my . . . well, I won't be quite that clever, I suppose. But thank you anyway, Albert dear—thank you."

She stuffed the important-looking sheaf in her large purse, opened the glass door, and marched out. At the desk she handed the now empty box and her key for it to the attendant.

"I won't be needing this box any more," she told him.

The man gave her an embarrassed smile. She knew what he was thinking. The poor old lady had nothing more to keep in the box. She would have liked to confide in the man, to tell him not to worry about her, because she still had her wits.

Instead, she went upstairs to the main floor and presented herself at the "Savings" window. From her purse she produced the little black book and pushed it toward the man inside the cage. "I want to withdraw all there is," she told him.

Again she got that sympathetic look. But she didn't confide in this man either. She watched him as he consulted a big ledger, made a notation of a few cents' interest, ran her book through a machine that put a stamp on it. Then he opened his money drawer, counted out bills and a few coins.

"Two hundred thirty-seven dollars and fifty-eight cents, Mrs. Owen," he said.

"Thank you," she said sadly, putting the money in her purse.

"You won't be keeping an account with us any longer, Mrs. Owen?"

"I don't think I'll need it," she answered.

And then she left before the man could pry any further into her affairs.

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She took a bus back to her rented room, keeping a death-grip on her purse all the way. She didn't relax that grip till she was safely home, and her door locked.

But she didn't sit down to rest. In fact, she felt amazingly full of life and energy. Why shouldn't she, she asked herself. At seventy, she had scarcely known a day of illness. Her small frame, her thinness and apparent fragility, were her natural look, and deceiving. Actually she was healthy and spry.

Her only suitcase—not worn-looking, for she'd done little traveling—lay open on the bed. She glanced around the room, trying to decide whether there was anything else she wanted to take with her. No, there wasn't. She wanted to take only the good things, the presentable things. Anything that even hinted of shabbiness she would leave behind. Those days of poverty were over.

She smiled again, then even laughed aloud as she gazed over the room. She was saying goodbye to all this: the sagging, lumpy bed that was so unkind to her sleep; the threadbare curtains she'd peeked through for so many hours in vain attempts to stay in contact with the busy outside world; the grimy, faded, and depressing walls that had kept her prisoner for so long; and the rocker . . . she was almost sorry to leave the rocker. But she caught herself up promptly. The rocker was so ancient and squeaked so loudly that she had become hesitant about sitting in it. "There's poor old Mrs. Owen rocking her life away," she was sure the other boarders said when they heard the squeak of it through the cardboard-thin walls. No, she wasn't quite ready for a rocking chair yet, squeak or not.

There was nothing here for her—nothing. Six years she'd spent in this room. At least twenty hours of every day for six years. Yes, she could stay a little longer—$237.58 longer. Fifteen weeks maybe. And then what?

She shuddered for a moment, there in the midst of her anticipated happiness. She'd had a glimpse one day of a place they'd called "an old folks' home." That glimpse had haunted her, waking and sleeping—a long line of old ladies sitting in rocking chairs, doing nothing, not talking, not seeing . . . just waiting . . . waiting to die. It was a painful and terrifying sight. Just remembering it strengthened Mrs. Owen's resolve now. She would never go to such a place! She had made the right choice in going through with her Big Idea.

She didn't linger any more. She snapped the suitcase shut and lifted it off the bed. It did not seem very heavy—her worthwhile possessions were few. She took the suitcase and descended the stairs.

She was not surprised when Mrs. Bennett intercepted her at the front door. Very few people entering or

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leaving this house did so without Mrs. Bennett's knowledge. Now the landlady fastened her suspicious eyes on the suitcase.

"Moving out, Mrs. Owen?"

For once in her life Mrs. Owen was not dismayed by her hostess. "Yes, I'm moving out," she said grandly. "I'm paid up to the end of the week, but you can keep what's owing to me, Mrs. Bennett."

"What's owing to you! Why, you've not given me the slightest notice!"

"You can rent my room tomorrow for half again as much as I've been paying—at least, that's what you've always told me."

And then she walked out the front door, stopping at the sidewalk and setting the suitcase down. A taxi came scooting by and she waved it down with her handkerchief.

"Oh, the nerve of her, riding in a cab," Mrs. Bennett would be saying. And Mrs. Owen heartily agreed. The nerve of herself indeed! But that was what it took for a helpless old lady to get along in the world—nerve, unmitigated nerve.

"Where to, ma'm?" the taxi driver was asking.

She had the answer ready on her lips, but it stuck there. For a fearful moment her own boldness appalled her. What she should tell the man was, "The nearest poorhouse"—if she were perfectly honest, that is. But she took a big breath and said firmly, "Lakeside Hotel."

Then, as the driver nodded and the cab picked up speed, she managed to smile again. She *was* going through with it. She was actually doing it. She straightened up, summoned the courage to glance around at the passing traffic. My, this was nice, this traveling by taxi. For six years she had never ridden in anything except a bus, and more often she had walked. But this was better, much better. Already she was beginning to feel like a real lady. And feeling like one, she'd be able to act like one.

She was almost sorry when the ride came to an end. But she liked the way the taxi drove right up under the big canopy in front of the Lakeside Hotel, and the way the green-coated doorman opened the door, helped her out, and took care of her suitcase. She fumbled in her purse to pay the driver, and didn't forget to tip him a half dollar either. She was sure the doorman noticed that she seemed to have quite a lot of money in her purse. After all, not many ladies go around with $237.58 in their pocketbooks.

She'd been so successful thus far that she approached the clerk's desk with what she was sure was an air of confidence. The man's obsequious manner, the way he didn't seem to doubt for a moment that she was somebody who belonged here, helped her too.

"I hope you can give me a nice room," she began. She spoke softly, clearly, and her voice was steady. "I

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understand there's a nice view of the lake here, and if I like it, I may stay for some time."

The man was so pleased he almost rubbed his hands with joy. A permanent guest, a genteel little old lady who wouldn't make any trouble and could obviously pay for what she wanted. A perfect guest for any residential hotel.

"I'm Mr. Satterfield," the man said. He was small and fat, with pomaded hair and mustache. "I'm the assistant manager here. Consider me at your service, madam." He turned to the little slots with numbers labeling them. "303 is an excellent room. High enough for a fine view and not too tedious a ride on the elevator."

"I'll try it," Mrs. Owen said. She had to be careful not to seem too anxious or too easy to please.

Mr. Satterfield fished out the key to Room 303. "I'll be happy to show you something else if you don't like this one," he said. He pushed a registration card and a pen toward her.

She signed her name honestly. She hadn't considered using an alias, and it was too late to think of one now. But the blank space for her address confused her for a moment. What was she to put there? Mrs. Bennett's boarding house? Of course not. Nor any other local address. Hotels might have a habit of checking such matters. Well, what then? Suddenly the inspiration came. Stockdale. The little place where she'd grown up, where she'd met and married Albert, and where she'd been so happy long ago. That was where she was really from, wasn't it? And there was nothing wrong with a rich little old lady's being from some unheard-of small town, was there? She wrote *Stockdale* on the registration card.

She saw Mr. Satterfield's brows go up as he scanned what she had written. "I'm a widow," she explained hastily. "When my husband died, I didn't want to live there anymore. So I sold everything and left."

The assistant manager looked both sympathetic and satisfied. She had lied a little—fibbed, really—and insinuated more. Well, she'd have to get used to telling little fibs—keeping them as small and vague as possible, of course.

She took the bundle of Albanian bonds from her purse, laid them on the desk, but not so Mr. Satterfield could see what they really were. "Do you have a safe?" she asked him.

He was really impressed now, even more humble and cooperative. "Oh, yes, Mrs. Owen, a very good safe."

"Give me an envelope, please."

The assistant manager obeyed slavishly. She thrust the bonds into the envelope, sealed it carefully, then wrote her name and the date on the back, directing the pen several times across the closure line. That would discourage prying, she told herself. Finally she handed Mr. Satterfield the envelope and watched him place it in the safe.

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"I'm a silly old lady, I suppose," she said, "but I don't trust banks."

Mr. Satterfield smiled understandingly.

"Now about the room," she went on. "What's the monthly rate?" She extracted the wad of currency from her purse. "Shall I pay a month in advance?"

Mr. Satterfield raised his pudgy little hands deprecatingly. "I'll have to look up the monthly rate on 303," he said. "And besides, you might not like the room, Mrs. Owen. You can pay us any time—no hurry, madam, no hurry at all."

She returned the roll of bills triumphantly to her purse. The assistant manager rang a little bell. A boy emerged from nowhere, grabbed Mrs. Owen's suitcase, and led her to an elevator.

She was jubilant on the way up, and even more so as she walked over the deep pile rug in the corridor and as the boy unlocked and pushed open the door of 303 and let her enter ahead of him. It was dim and shadowy inside the room, but the boy quickly crossed to the windows and opened the drapes to let the sunshine stream in. It was a beautiful day.

And a beautiful room. She fell in love with it at first sight. She had never known luxury at any time during her life, not even when Albert was alive. Albert had been a barber, and the little apartment in the rear of his shop had been pleasant and cheerful only to the extent that she had shared it with the man she loved. But this was different. This was luxury—true luxury.

The rug was rich and deep here too. The walls were gay with bright flowers, like in a garden. The furniture gleamed with polish. The bed looked immense, covered with a spread that appeared to be white silk—the bed of a princess, or a bride. And outside the window she could glimpse the blue sky and the blue water.

"Will there be anything else?" the boy was asking.

"No," Mrs. Owen said, "this is perfect."

The boy turned to go, and she tried to emerge from her dream, remembering her role. "What's your name, young man?" she asked.

"Waldo, ma'm."

She found a dollar bill in her purse and handed it to him. His babyish face grinned. He could not have been more than seventeen.

"If I need anything, can I ask for you especially, Waldo?"

"You sure can, ma'm."

He left, closing the door quietly behind him. Mrs. Owen stood stock-still in the center of the room for a moment. Finally she crossed to the bed. She tested it first with her hands. It seemed so soft that it seemed not to resist her touch at all. Then she sat on it, and feeling suddenly tired, stretched out full length. It was as if she were lying down on a cloud.

"Ah, Albert," she said aloud,

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"What do you think of me? Am I doing such a terrible thing? Are you ashamed of me, Albert? Tell me to stop, if you think I should. Tell me, dear . . ."

But Albert said nothing and Mrs. Owen drifted off into a wonderland of sleep.

In the dining room of the Lakeside Hotel, Mrs. Owen's streak of luck continued. There she encountered Valerie, and Valerie seemed to take an interest in fragile old ladies —especially prosperous-looking fragile old ladies. But Mrs. Owen wasn't particular about motives.

Valerie was a plump, not unattractive brunette in her late thirties, unmarried to judge from her ringless fingers. Being a waitress was her job, and she was a professional at it. She found Mrs. Owen a small table in a secluded corner.

"I may be staying at the hotel for some time," Mrs. Owen announced, "and I'll be taking all my meals here. This is such a nice table!"

"I'll save it for you every day, Mrs. Owen," Valerie assured her.

Mrs. Owen had a glass of sherry before the meal. The rich, strong flavor of it warmed her, infused a glow into both her body and her spirit. She felt bolder than ever, so that when she instructed Valerie about matters of food she sounded like a woman used to command.

"A steak, yes. But a small one, and perfectly lean and tender. Medium rare—you *will* remember that, won't you? A baked potato, peas, and a nice salad with French dressing . . ."

She laughed to herself as Valerie exited to the kitchen. When was the last time she'd had steak? Certainly never at Mrs. Bennett's. It had been stew there mostly, except for the annual occasion when the Christmas spirit moved Mrs. Bennett to provide a tough old tom turkey which Mrs. Owen's teeth could scarcely dent. And this immaculate white tablecloth and sparkling silver . . . Mrs. Bennett's stained checkered cloths and cutlery so worn you could taste the metal with the food —all seemed far away from the splendid dining room of the Lakeside Hotel.

She sipped her sherry with deliberate slowness, then began to look around the room. It was full of well-dressed people. At the far end a small orchestra played unobtrusively. Not dance music, but restful, peaceful melodies that would aid the digestion. What a different sound from the noises around Mrs. Bennett's table!—the clacking of knives and forks, a dozen mouths chewing all at once, and Mrs. Bennett's shrill voice reminding somebody that his or her rent was overdue. Mrs. Owen told herself again —for the hundredth time that day— that she had no regrets, not a single one.

The dinner, when Valerie brought it, was exactly what Mrs. Owen had ordered. When dessert

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and coffee time came, Mrs. Owen had only to glance up, and Valerie was there.

"I presume I can sign for the check," Mrs. Owen said at the end of it all.

"Yes, ma'm."

"And a tip for yourself, dear. What's the customary? Twenty per cent?"

Valerie added the gratuity with a smile, and Mrs. Owen signed her full name with a flourish. Then she went upstairs to her room where, acting on instructions, Waldo was just finishing the installation of a television set.

Her first real test came when the assistant manager introduced her to Mr. Lewis, the manager. Mr. Lewis was tall, dreadfully thin, but he wore the same kind of clipped, little black mustache that Mr. Satterfield did. Mr. Lewis expressed his delight at having Mrs. Owen as a guest, and then more delight at Mrs. Owen's report that Room 303 was quite satisfactory. But Mr. Lewis was a man of business as well as a man of charm.

"About the room," he began, coughing slightly. "I undertand Mr. Satterfield did not have the monthly rate at his fingertips when you registered, Mrs. Owen. Would two-fifty a month be satisfactory?"

"That would be fine," Mrs. Owen said, aware that the sum was more than the hoard in her purse, but not flickering an eyelash.

"Well, good," Mr. Lewis said.

And then there was a silence for a few seconds, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Finally it was Mr. Lewis who gave in. But he kept smiling.

"How would you like to pay this, Mrs. Owen . . .?"

Mrs. Owen was ready. And her confidence had improved steadily in the last few days. "Oh, yes," she began in a perfectly level voice, "I wanted to settle that very thing. You see, Mr. Lewis, those securities you're keeping in your safe for me . . . I have very little cash outside those securities."

Mr. Lewis, obviously a veteran of the hotel business, looked suddenly alert and suspicious. But Mrs. Owen hastened to reassure him.

"But the securities are very valuable. Common stocks. You understand about common stocks, Mr. Lewis? Well, mine happen to be rising in value nearly every day, and if you wouldn't mind I'd rather wait a bit. It would mean cashing something, you see . . ."

Mr. Lewis still looked a little doubtful—until Mrs. Owen administered the *coup de grâce*.

"You needn't worry, of course, Mr. Lewis, if that's what you're thinking about. After all, you have my securities in your possession."

Quite suddenly Mr. Lewis was all apologies and cooperation. "Don't give it another thought, dear Mrs. Owen. We'll carry the bill just as long as you like."

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She thanked him, and then sailed into the dining room where Valerie would be waiting with her special breakfast at her special table.

Over a month passed and everything went splendidly. Mrs. Owen lived like a dowager empress, and with the expenditure of almost no cash. The Lakeside Hotel was a veritable city to itself, ministering to all human wants. The all-inclusive bill included laundry, meals in the dining room complete with Valerie's tips, even sundries from the hotel's drug store. An occasional dollar to Waldo for running an errand—Mrs. Owen had found no convenient way of obtaining Waldo's services on credit—was the only money she really spent. At this rate her little hoard would last for a long time indeed.

But of course she was not so naive as to imagine that this status could endure forever. She was ready with her next move when she began to sense that Mr. Lewis's patience was becoming a trifle strained. It wasn't anything that he said exactly. It was rather those looks he gave her, a bit more nervous and apprehensive every day. And she realized it was strategically important that she, not he, should make the next move.

She chose a day when she saw that Mr. Lewis and Mr. Satterfield were together in their little office. When she walked in they jumped to their feet like the well-trained servants of the public they were.

"Mrs. Owen," Mr. Lewis began hopefully, "I'll bet you want to take your securities out of our safe . . ."

"Oh, no," she said, noting his sudden deflation. "But I want to do something much more important. Would you mind asking your bellboy Waldo and your waitress Valerie to step in here?"

Mr. Lewis moved with the speed of a frightened man, apparently anticipating that Mrs. Owen was about to hurl some dreadful complaint. He hurried out to the desk, summoned Waldo with a tap on the bell, and sent Waldo to fetch Valerie. Within a minute they were all gathered back in the office, and Mrs. Owen had the floor.

"You've all been so good to me," she began.

It was Mr. Lewis who started to say something, but Mrs. Owen stopped him. "Oh, yes, you have," she said. "You four people right here. I was a lonely old woman who had just lost her husband, and you four took me in. That's what you did—you took me in. Oh, I know I could have rented a room anywhere. But here at the Lakeside it's been different. I've found friends—real friends."

She paused a moment, let them utter their embarrassed little monosyllables. "Now I want to do something for you in return," she continued. "As you know, I have some very valuable securities here in the hotel safe. They're getting more valuable all the time, as a matter of

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fact. You might say I'm a rich woman. And I'm not going to live forever. I have a few distant relatives that I'm not interested in, but I have no friends anywhere but here at Lakeside. You four people are the only friends I have in the world. So I want to see to it that you four get my money when I die. I want to make a will here and now."

She let them react. She listened to their amazement and their expressions of gratitude, and she knew that her strategy had won. She'd get better service than ever in the dining room, she wouldn't hear anything about the bill for a while, and she might even manage, in the forgetful fashion of old people, to overlook tipping Waldo in cash.

"Take a piece of paper right this instant, Mr. Satterfield," she directed. "You type, don't you? Put the paper in that typewriter and I'll dictate . . ."

The will she concocted was legal-sounding enough. She had read a will once, and she remembered the wording—poor Albert's will, very legal-sounding, but empty because poor Albert had had nothing to bequeath. The will which Mrs. Owen composed now left all her worldly possessions, share and share alike, among her four friends. Mr. Lewis, Mr. Satterfield, Valerie, and Waldo. When it was finished, Mr. Lewis dragooned two other hotel employees into the office, and the will was signed and duly witnessed.

The scene ended on something of an emotional plane. Mrs. Owen shook hands with the manager, and the assistant manager, and with Waldo. And Valerie, in a burst of sentimentality, wept real tears and she hugged Mrs. Owen.

Mrs. Owen acted her role as skillfully as any of them. She was well aware that the little glitter in their eyes was the shine less of friendship than of greed. Noticing that, her conscience did not trouble her.

When the month of September arrived, it became a little chilly. Things were snug enough in the Lakeside, of course, but Mrs. Owen noted the change in seasons principally by the change in the panorama outside her windows. The bathers and the sailboats were gone now. Soon, she thought to herself, there'll be ice skaters out there. Always something to watch. What an interesting world.

The only difficulty in her life came with the discovery one morning, as she was getting dressed, that her dress was a bit snug. Then it dawned on her. What with Valerie's careful ministrations, she was actually getting fat. That would never do. Getting fat would mean she would have to buy a new wardrobe, and her resources didn't allow for that. She'd just have to cut down a bit on calories, that was all there was to it. Imagine—dieting, when not so long ago at Mrs. Bennett's she was near to starvation.

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On the first of October, as she did on the first of every month, she counted the money in her purse. It came to $216.33. Good, she thought, I've completely stopped giving tips to Waldo now, and he's just as attentive as ever. $216.33 was almost to the penny the amount she'd had on the first of September.

November came and went. It got even chillier outside, and inside too a frigidity began to develop slowly, like a glacier advancing through the eons. Mrs. Owen was aware of this, but she did not retreat. Her purse remained closed. The Albanian bonds continued to nestle in the hotel safe.

December wasn't very far along —in fact, the Lakeside had begun to introduce discreet Christmas decorations in the lobby—when Mr. Lewis, whose nervousness had increased considerably, ambushed Mrs. Owen between the dining room and the elevator.

"Mrs. Owen, may I have a word with you?"

She had been considering a pretense of deafness, but had decided to reserve that as a last resort. It would be such a crude tactic. "Yes, Mr. Lewis," she said sweetly.

"Mrs. Owen, I hate bringing this matter up . . . in view of your kindness to all of us . . ." He spoke haltingly, like a man under duress. "But the end of the year is approaching, you see, and the auditors will be coming . . . Your bill is quite large now and I'm not sure the auditors will understand . . . this hotel does not normally extend such enormous credit."

Mrs. Owen waited.

"Don't you think you could sell just some little thing?"

"But, Mr. Lewis, the value of my securities is going up all the time."

"I realize that, ma'm . . ."

"And you know who would be hurt by my selling prematurely, Mr. Lewis. Not myself, but you people who are going to inherit my estate."

She left him with that unanswerable argument, and swept on to the elevator. She went straight up to her room. She felt no sense of panic. Life was too good. Christmas was coming. And no one threw poor old ladies out on the sidewalk during the Christmas season.

It was the day of the first snow, and the Santa Clauses and the Salvation Army were in the streets, tinkling their little bells. Mrs. Owen watched the gay scene all day from her window. She was quite happy. This was her nicest Christmas, she decided, since Albert had passed away.

It was toward evening, and she was just thinking of going downstairs to dinner as the loud knock came from her door. When she answered the knock, she found the whole delegation of four on her threshold. They were all white-faced and grim-looking as they pushed inside and closed the door behind them.

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A few months ago Mrs. Owen might have been frightened, as she'd been so often frightened of Mrs. Bennett. But not now. These people had bowed and scraped to her too long.

"What is it, please?" she asked, unflustered and ladylike.

Mr. Lewis, as senior in command, was the spokesman. "Mrs. Owen," he began, "your constant talk of the continuous rise in the value of your securities was finally too much for my curiosity."

From behind his back, where he'd been concealing it all the time, Mr. Lewis brought forth the envelope. It was no longer sealed, but had been opened carefully, probably steamed open.

"Mrs. Owen, there has been no Kingdom of Albania for some years. In fact, Albania is now behind the Iron Curtain."

Mrs. Owen remained brave. "I was counting on a revolution . . ." she started to explain. As she did, she sidestepped toward the bed, where her purse lay. A quick sweep and she had it firmly in her grasp.

When Mr. Satterfield made a move toward her, she stopped him with a sharp warning. "If you lay a hand on me, Mr. Satterfield, I'll scream and rouse the whole hotel."

"I'll take it away from her if you want me to," Valerie volunteered.

"No!" Mr. Lewis almost shouted. Mr. Lewis was, of course, exquisitely sensitive in matters of public relations. "Let's don't make things any worse than they are. If you want to do something useful, you can pack Mrs. Owen's suitcase."

Both Valerie and Waldo undertook that task with a vengeance. It was not the neatest job of packing Mrs. Owen had seen, but nothing was really damaged. Mr. Satterfield, watching the process, was inconsolable.

"Mr. Lewis," he asked his superior, "what are we going to do? She's taking her luggage with her, and the money in her purse too. How are we going to make it all good?"

"We're not going to make it good," Mr. Lewis answered fiercely. "We've been had."

They were finally ready to go. "Waldo," Mr. Lewis said, "you'll have to carry the suitcase. We simply can't let our guests see a woman going through our lobby carrying her own suitcase."

They went down together in the elevator, and they stayed together as they traversed the lobby, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Satterfield walking abreast in front, Valerie and Waldo to the rear, and Mrs. Owen in the middle.

"You may call me a taxi," Mrs. Owen said at the door. "I'm going to another hotel. And, Mr. Lewis, you still have my bonds."

The manager glanced at the envelope which he still held in his hands. "Tear 'em up," Mr. Satterfield advised spitefully, "or she'll pull this trick on the next place."

It was at that remark that Mr.

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Lewis's eyes lighted, that his whole face became suffused with something that looked like the Christmas spirit. "Another hotel . . . Albanian bonds . . ." he mumbled. Then, "Mr. Satterfield, remember when Carstairs over at the Chamberlain sent us the Maharajah of Lao Koo?

Suddenly both the manager and his assistant began to giggle uncontrollably. Then Mr. Lewis personally led the procession outside, personally opened the door of the taxi for Mrs. Owen, personally thrust her suitcase inside, and as a last flourish handed back to Mrs. Owen her Albanian bonds.

"Be sure to see Mr. Carstairs at the Hotel Chamberlain," he said, still giggling. "I think you know exactly what to tell him."

The taxi door was shut before Mrs. Owen had a chance to thank Mr. Lewis. The cab roared off through the swirling snow, and she settled back contentedly on the seat. Yes, this was a world where a poor old lady could make her way. This Mr. Carstairs . . . surely there'd be someone *he'd* want to get even with . . .

NEXT MONTH . . .

HUGH PENTECOST's	*The Missing Miss Maydew*
CORNELL WOOLRICH's	*Dead Roses*
MICHAEL GILBERT's	*The Invisible Loot*
THOMAS WALSH's	*Always a Stranger*
JACK LONDON's	*Lost Face*

and a "special" by a famous TV star

STEVE ALLEN's	*Murder à la Hollywood*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CRAIG RICE**

TITLE: ***Smoke Rings***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: John J. Malone

LOCALE: Chicago

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *One of the strangest motives for murder on record: the victim blew ordinary round smoke rings through his nose...*

"MY DEAR GIRL," JOHN J. MALONE, the celebrated criminal lawyer said gently, "I am your attorney. You can confide in me."

The frightened young woman looked at him with wide, dark-lashed hazel eyes, and shook her head.

"And remember," Malone said, "that Dr. Cramer, here, is your psychiatrist. You've already confided in him—to a certain extent."

She shook her head again. She was a small, lovely young thing, with a heart-shaped face and softly curling light brown hair.

Get that in front of a jury, Malone told himself, *and back it up with a good motive.*

Dr. Cramer patted her encouragingly on the shoulder. He was a tall, handsome, gray-haired man with a reassuring couchside manner.

"Come, my dear," he said. "Tell Mr. Malone just what happened, and how, and why. We're only here to help you."

"After all," Malone added, "we don't want to see you in jail for life. Or," he went on with deliberate brutality, "in the electric chair." Then he smiled and said, in a different tone, "Don't worry. I've never lost a client yet."

She looked up at him and spoke for the first time. "Yes, Mr. Malone. I shot my husband. I had to."

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"You haven't told this to the police, I hope," the little counselor said anxiously.

"Not to anyone, until now. I shot him with his own gun. I'd stolen it and been practicing with it for weeks, so I'd be sure to hit him."

Malone groaned inwardly. There went the case. "You mean," he said, "it wasn't a momentary impulse? Something that happened — just like that?"

She shook her lovely head. "I planned it for a long time, Mr. Malone. I had to do it, you see—I had to."

"But why?" Malone demanded.

"Because he was driving me crazy," she said simply.

Well, that might do it—with a good jury. "How?" Malone asked.

"He blew smoke rings through his nose," she said, and fainted.

The little lawyer yelled for the jail matron and said to Dr. Cramer, hoarsely, "Now, I really have heard everything."

An hour later, in the comfortable security of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar, Malone said, "We'd better have another. We both need it. And I could do with some explanations."

The psychiatrist picked up his drink and sighed. "She came to me some weeks ago, a frightened child. Her only problem was—her husband blew smoke rings through his nose. I tried to humor her."

Malone lit a fresh cigar and said, "Go on."

"I asked her if he blew square smoke rings. She shook her head. I asked her if he blew triangular smoke rings. Again she shook her head."

Malone shuddered.

"There isn't a jury in the world would convict her," he said. "Tell me the rest of it."

"I asked her if he blew oblong smoke rings. Again she shook her head and suddenly began to cry. She said, 'Dr. Cramer, he blows just ordinary round smoke rings. But he blows them through his nose.'"

The doctor paused to light a cigarette. "I tried to reassure her. I said, 'My dear child, you have nothing to worry about. In this world there must be hundreds of thousands of men who blow smoke rings through their noses.'"

The little lawyer nodded. "I agree with you."

"She broke down completely." Dr. Cramer sighed again. "She said, 'Yes, I know that. There probably are hundred of thousands of men who blow smoke rings through their noses. But, you see —*my husband doesn't smoke!*'"

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A story that is distinguished in style and in characterizations, a story that, we hope, you will be glad to have had the opportunity to read . . . The author is Finnish, and she wrote this story "in an extremely small house on a red cliff of a Spanish island in the southern Mediterranean. It only rains two weeks a year, and the almond trees are in bloom for Christmas . . . I have a boxer called Korda, a cat called Tigre, and a maid called Pepa . . ."—and the author has the audacity to say that she does not speak or write English fluently!

LOOK TO YOUR SKELETONS

by EVA-LIS WUORIO

WILLIE WAS THE MOST NAUSEatingly nice person you would ever hope to meet. He was the friend in the storm, the knife in your back, the man who loved Handel's *Water Music,* the expert on the raw facts of life. Willie, at his convenience, was all things to all men. No one's reputation was safe with Willie, nor need anyone ever starve, friend or enemy, while there was Willie and his soup.

Willie had a Palace. To listen to Willie you'd think a Palace was the last thing he'd want. Actually, for him, the possession of a Palace released his inferiority complexes from their cages, permitting him to behave as he had never behaved before.

Willie's Palace was up in the old town and unlike most of the great old houses there which have been turned into flats and sketchily modernized, it still climbed its various crumbling stories, opening into odd courtyards and hanging terraces, with half a dozen roof levels, beamed and odd-shaped rooms, arches and staircases and Moorish kitchens.

Willie had a flair for decorating and somehow he'd managed to make the old ruin into a pleasant home, even though most of the rooms had only a bed and a table and a woven blanket on the wall. The main room, a ballroom of other days, which he used as his studio, was really charming. He'd built in a new, huge fireplace, hung the walls with paintings, set in low couches and tables, and floated flowers in large yellow platters. A big door opened onto a vine-covered terrace from which there was a view over the town, the harbor, the hills, and the sea.

I was on my way up there when I met the Hon. Tigger Abbot-Fitzabbot at the Bar Espanol. Rather, she hailed me from her table under

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the broad leaves of a plane tree.

"Are you in town?"

"As you see," I said. "Got a lift in. The film star's boat, yet."

"Gracious," said Tigger. "Not *the* Robert Steele. Surely he's not in Formentera?" She made it sound like slumming, which, in a manner of speaking, it is—Formentera being even a more primitive Mediterranean island than Ebesus.

"He seems to like it," I said. "And anyhow, he isn't precisely slumming it. He lives on the boat and she's as luxurious as a Hilton Hotel. What will you have?"

"Fundador. No ice." She looked even more brittle than usual, as though you could snap her in two like a thin match. Her white hair was swept back with scentless hair set, and she wore huge amber earrings and amber-colored slacks—sure signs she was going to a party. Quite likely the same one where I was off to, I thought.

She jittered and clinked and prattled on about people who'd come on the Palma boat and gone out on the Barcelona boat, and then she snapped, "So you've been summoned too?"

"If you mean Willie," I said, "I got a telephone message which didn't exactly make sense and a note with Mario of the Manolitō which he remembered to deliver after the boat had left. However, there was the lift offered, so I thought I'd come over and see what's what."

"What did you ever see in Willie?"

"What? Head, a body, two arms, two legs—the usual things."

"Don't be a fool, Anne. Are you still in love with him?"

"Now lay off, Tigger," I said.

"I could never understand it. Though I suppose there is certain attraction in his type of uninhibited vileness."

"Oh, for goodness' sake," I said.

"Well, let's go," Tigger shrugged. "I'd like to get there first and quarter and draw him."

I paid the bill and we went toward the Mercado.

The Mercado is below the ramp where long ago there used to be a drawbridge.

I said, "Will you wait a moment while I see if I can find some cucumbers."

At the far stand, in the slanting purple-blue light of the covered market, there was Bertie Vanderval bargaining over oranges from Andalusia. Bertie runs an art gallery, and is mild, pink, and absent-minded. He seemed flustered this noon.

"Hi-ho, Bertie," I said. "Have you seen any cucumbers, my vice?"

"You too, Anne," he said. "Going up the hill? What is *your* guilty secret?"

"What passes in this town?" I asked. "These big city alarums alarum me."

"But you *are* going up to Willie's?"

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"Yes. Why?"

Bertie nodded vaguely. "I wonder," he said, then added, "Let us leave our purchases at Caesar's Pharmacy and we'll go up together."

"The Hon. Tigger is waiting at the gates," I said. "We seem to be quite a party."

"She is?" Bertie stared at the mammoth pile of oranges as if he were seeing a skeleton. Then he said, "And no doubt we shall be joined by others. Willie returned with information."

"Information?"

"Willie's kind. Scandalous and twisted. Or have you no skeletons in your cupboard?"

At which he picked up my shopping *capacho*. I followed him. At the end of the market, where you start up the ramp to the walled town, a gray Landrover was stopped behind a mule cart. The man driving it had an eagle-lean face topped by dark hair. He was shouting at everyone in general. I had no difficulty recognizing Paul de Girandeau.

"Hi," I said, pausing by the car.

"These imbeciles! These moronic offsprings of a backward ape! These forgotten of God's cretins! They have no idea in what century they live!"

"Well, goodbye," I said.

His purple face turned to me. "Are you going up the hill? Do you wish a lift?"

"And Bertie. And Tigger."

"Oh." There was a most unusual moment of quiet. Then Girandeau said, "I gather our destination is the same. Come along—come if you are coming."

We drove up through the Portal de las Tablas where you can still see the portcullis and a sign saying, "In the name of Charles V, Emperor and Victorious King of Spain and the Indies, these walls were built in the year 1585 and this island governed by Ferdinand Canoquere."

You have to make a pretty swift turn into the small plaza de Luis Tur y Palau and Paul's driving left us speechless. We passed the Carrossa, the eucalyptus trees, the palaces and churches.

Finally, bending the car in the middle to turn into Willie's angle courtyard, Paul snapped, "W is it all about? What? *Que?*"

But by then Willie was le out of his portcullis of a window calling, "So yo dear friends, so you arriv

Looking back, it seem was like a spring wo with malicious delig his I'd once learned sight is always so that suddenly I w go away, far aw

Instead, in mounted the impressive

Upstairs girl I'd noteworthy

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everyone has met everyone. She was in very tight Las Vegas shorts, her hair hung like a mane about her head, and she was barefooted.

"Do come in," she said. "I'm Lena."

I had sometimes done the job of greeting Willie's guests, and though I wouldn't have taken it on for any price again, her familiarity still grated. Put it down to pure female viciousness.

"Well, well, well. Here is the well-traveled Old Maestro himself," Willie announced himself, coming through the arches into the studio. He'd lately taken to making appearances rather than just being there. He was barefoot too, but artistically attired in various shades of pale blue in linen slacks, silk shirt, foulard. Even his beret was new and pale blue.

"You seem to have done pretty well by yourself," I said cattily, for we all remembered the paint-smeared ragged Willie of years past. "How long were you away?"

"Don't tell me your heart didn't eep count of the long days, Anne, ear," Willie said. "Friends, what a p! Culture! Believe me, people l eat off silver plate—real silver!" The Baron did you well?" Paul d underline his words too. illie's trip had been sponsored an elderly, paunchy, near- d Danish Baron, who had a fancy to Willie's pretty pic- nd Willie's charm—which could certainly turn on when the occasion warranted. With the Baron it warranted because the Baron was rich.

"Denmark," Willie went on, "the beer, the sandwiches. You'd probably remember the Mattiesen Gallery of Modern Art, eh, Bertie? Very interesting canvases there, eh, Bertie?"

Bertie looked bleak. He mumbled something and went out to the balcony.

"Don't go," Willie said cheerfully. "Have a drink, mix one for the others too, make yourself useful. That's the least you can do. Tigger will have a cognac, won't you, Tigger? They still remember you in St. Paul de Vence from the way you could put away cognac, Tigger."

"You were at St. Paul?" Day in and day out for years Tigger had given us the life and times of St. Paul, as well as the rest of the coast in the gay times of the twenties. Now she sounded as if she had barely heard of the place.

"Wanted to check up," Willie said. "Remember your friend the Duke? And the Graham-Townsends? Dickie Cousins? Not to speak of Richard MacRitchie."

"I'm thirsty," I said. We all knew Tigger's penchant for dropping names. A harmless little pastime, and it really seemed too unkind of Willie to twit her about it.

"Ah, you are still drinking, are you, Anne, dear girl," Willie grinned at me. "A pity, you know."

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"Yes, I know," I said. "What will you have, Tigger?"

Paul de Girandeau had been looking at the paintings Willie had brought back from his trip. They were like all his things, very precise, very pretty. He had been a commercial artist for years and the slickness stuck to his brush and palette.

"What range camera did you use for these?" Paul asked. "Must have been very fine lens. Good detail."

For a second Willie bared his teeth in a snarl of a smile. "A wit, Paul, as always," he said. "By the way, I got up to the north of Denmark. I stopped in the village belonging to the Axelstrom family. A very fine place, antique and all. I heard a few stories. Particularly about the daughter. I'd often wondered, you know."

"You swine," said Paul de Girandeau.

He took a menacing step.

That moment the girl Lena ran out of the kitchen. "Willie! He's coming *here!* Willie!"

"Who?" I said. Any other sound was better than Willie's conversation.

"Robert Steele, the film star," Lena said, flushed like a child.

I finished mixing my gin and bitters and poured out a Fundador for Tigger. Willie moved to the doorway at the top of the stairs.

"I wonder if this will be another victim, or just a tourist to be victimized," Tigger said tightly.

"Willie loves celebrities," I said. "And as to what Willie says, there's no point worrying. No one pays attention any more."

"The slime sticks," Tigger said. "True or false. Willie is adept at twisting truth to his own ends." She gulped down her drink. "If he hurts Leslie I'll kill him. I swear it."

He must be seventy, Tigger's husband Leslie. She tells scandalous stories about his foibles and he adores her. They are sweet together.

Robert Steele came in then. He towered over Willie, seemed to crowd even that large room. I'd noticed that sense of bigness as well as his actual physical size that morning on the boat. At the wheel of the *Fair Lady* he had the authentic air of the corsairs who had haunted these seas centuries ago. His square face was browned by weather and lined with his years—he must have been something over fifty now, yet he was still a romantic box-office draw.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be here yesterday," he was saying to Willie. "Stuck in Formentera with this curious windless weather. Thought I'd drop in today and apologize."

"Quite all right," said Willie, though he looked somewhat disconcerted. Obviously he hadn't planned for a witness to whatever he was up to. "Only a few friends here, come to say welcome to the Old Master back from his travels."

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"Well, I won't disturb you," Robert Steele said.

"Do stay," Willie said. "Have a look around. I've only some of my bits and pieces about. Lots more below in town in Bertie's gallery. Haven't I, Bertie? Or could they have got misplaced?"

I said quickly, "Willie's made his famous soup, Mr. Steele. You haven't lived, according to Willie, unless you've sampled it. He puts all his old paint tubes into it and stirs it with a goat's hoof, his own, don't you, Willie?"

"Anne is a wit," Willie said. "In fact, everyone here is a wit." He began to make introductions.

The atmosphere eased up. The tall film star's presence was somehow relaxing, celebrity though he was. Little flurries of conversation began to drift about.

In the midst of this, almost unnoticed, Luisa de la San Pilar came into the room. She is a masculine-looking Spanish woman who prefers the society of the island foreign colony to the native Spaniards. I hadn't known she was a particular friend of Willie's.

Bertie and I were standing at the bar by the doorway and I said hello.

Bertie said to her, "Didn't I just see you in Caesar's Pharmacy? What was that poison you were buying? Are you planning to commit murder?"

His words, as so often happens with a light, meaningless, yet portent phrase, fell into a small pool of silence.

Luisa de la San Pilar's dark skin turned darker. She shifted her *capacho* abruptly and a small parcel, wrapped in the unmistakable blue and white tissue paper that is the trademark of Caesar's Pharmacy, fell out.

Willie picked it up. "Naughty, naughty," he said. "Dangerous toys."

"Arsenic," Luisa looked him over coldly. "For a sick horse."

"I didn't know you had a horse," Tigger said. "I thought you rode a Vespa."

"This is the horse of a friend. It is good for the stomach of a horse."

She held out her hand for the parcel but Willie was off to the kitchen.

When he came back we were all on the balcony. It overhangs a small garden two stories below. The cactus plants were in purple flower and the judas tree in yellow, but there was hardly a leaf in the huge, old, silver-gray fig tree. It forked its pointed, sword-sharp branches upward. Below the gardens the narrow streets twisted through the town walls, and circling stone stairs dropped to the sea.

"You had an interesting trip?" Luisa looked at Willie coldly.

"Very interesting. I wrote you from Berlin."

"I have never been to Berlin."

"These friends of yours I met there knew you during the German

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occupation of Paris, Luisa," he said.

"It is very long ago." Her eyes were narrowed to slits.

Willie gave a chuckle. "You can't get into France, can you, Luisa?"

"I do not wish to go to France. A very slipshod nation. Will you get me a glass of wine, Bertie? No, I shall get it."

She strode into the studio.

Robert Steele was still leaning over the balustrade. I could swear his ears twitched.

I said to him, "Willie's in one of his moods."

"He has lots of moods?"

"Many. Believe me."

"I find all these people most interesting. I should like to know more about them."

"I was under the impression film stars were interested only in themselves."

"You see," he smiled at me. "The virus is catching. What makes you all so nasty?"

"What do you mean, nasty?"

"Everything that has been said seems to have a double edge, a double meaning."

"It's the weather. And Willie's mood. That's all."

"I don't know about that. I'll get you a drink, and then you'll tell me who we all are. Please?"

I watched him, tall over Willie, at the bar. Willie was drinking heavily, I suddenly realized. That was not usual for him at all. As a rule he was spouting the old saw about drink ruining the taste buds.

They must be about the same age, I thought, fiftyish. But how differently the years had dealt with them! Steele had an easy confidence. His interest in people could be genuine. Willie, who was always claiming to be an extrovert, had a tight look, such an exaggerated sureness of manner that it simply shouted insecurity. His deepest interest was in prying — to know something disadvantageous about a person seemed to give him a sense of power.

Steele came back.

"Tell me," he said.

"Well, if you really wish it," I found myself interested. We were an odd lot.

"Let's start with you," he said.

"Let's not. Let me see . . . There is Paul de Girandeau."

Steele wrinkled the corners of his eyes and looked into the shadows of the studio where Paul was talking to Lena, Willie's new girl.

"Let me try to guess," he said. "Younger son of an old family. Either Army or Foreign Legion in his past. Hot-tempered. Undependable. Charming. Footloose. Favorite with women."

"Not bad," I said.

"He is completely correct for each moment but each new moment does not necessarily complement the moment before."

"Are you sure you are not a psychiatrist, Mr. Steele?"

"Robert, please. How right am I?"

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"He has been married too many times to remember how many. I like him."

"Is he married now?"

I hesitated. I realized suddenly what Willie must have found out. Poor Astrid. I said, "To a very nice Danish woman."

Robert Steele nodded slowly. "All right. Next."

"Bertie Vanderval. Flemish. Kind, bumbling—at least, he appears on the surface to be bumbling. He came here a couple of years ago and tired of being a tourist. He started an art gallery. He sells the work of local artists.

"Then there is the Hon. Tigger Abbot-Fitzabbot. A very pleasant soul. The queen of the Cote d'Azur in the twenties. Reminisces better than F. Scott Fitzgerald reads, but the content is the same. Married to a charming old caricature of an English country gentleman. She squabbles with him all the time but they are devoted."

"And the Spanish woman?"

"Luisa de la San Pilar. She thinks all the Spaniards here are below her. I have a feeling 'class' to her is synonymous with 'money'—forgive the virus."

"Obviously. Don't waste spite on that. A very typical middle-class attitude."

"Well, yes," I admitted. "But I always feel uneasy when she appears."

"I can tell you about Lena," Steele said. "She told me Willie picked her up and said it was nice and cheap to live here."

"Willie's soon going to wear out those words. And the girls to say them to."

"So we have come to you. What about you?"

"I'm Anne MacLaren."

"But why are you here?"

I hesitated. What business was it of his anyhow? Then I said bluntly, "I came here when my husband and I separated. I stayed on."

"Despite what Willie may have done?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Obviously," Steele said slowly, "he's got something on all of you."

At which point Willie cried, "Soup's on, soup's on."

Robert Steele said, "Anne MacLaren, Paul de Girandeau, Tigger Abbot-Fitzabbot, Bertie Vanderval, Luisa de la San Pilar, Lena the Unknown, Willie, and me. That's the lot."

"That's the lot for today."

"But," he said, as he took my arm, "there are also all the others belonging to all of you who are present, though not in flesh."

"The skeletons," I said, "in our private closets."

The model stand is a low, square dais and Willie and Lena had set lunch on it. There was the immense jug of his famous soup, redolent with vegetables and herbs. There were large yellow bowls, green glasses, wooden salad bowls

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with uncut lettuce and cabbage, tomatoes and cucumbers, onions and cress, cheeses on olive-wood boards, bottles of wine, blue plates piled high with creamy butter, and loaves of peasant bread and French sticks on colored woven mats. It all looked good enough to eat.

I don't remember who served whom; for a time we still stood about, chatting, finishing our drinks, helping ourselves. Willie put on some long-playing records. I lay down on the couch and had a second helping but I don't remember who gave it to me.

I do remember Willie saying something about Leslie and a part of Tigger's reply, "I warn you, Willie, you harm Leslie and . . ." Then he asked, "Who'll have more soup?" — and as he ladled some to Bertie he said, "I'll want to know about those paintings, Bertie—today without fail."

He looked up to see Lena standing by Paul and he called across, "It's just occurred to me. Would you care to swap, de Girandeau? Astrid's a dish."

Abruptly Lena said, looking very young beneath the paint, "You deserve to die, Willie, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Lena." Willie looked at her as though she was something he had forgotten. "Not any more than anyone else."

There was an uprush of pointless conversation then. Everyone shifted places mechanically. It was as if we were trying to keep something nasty and threatening at bay by a civilized maneuver of manners.

When I next looked at Willie he was staring at his plate with a puzzled frown. He had a blurry look on his face.

"It's all right, isn't it?" he said slowly. "The soup?"

"Wonderful."

"Better than ever."

Willie spooned himself half a dozen mouthfuls. I watched him with an uneasy feeling that something was wrong.

When Lena brought in the coffee he gave up any further attempt to eat, poured himself the first cup, and took it out on the balcony. I noticed Robert Steele's eyes following him steadily.

Willie moved in a curiously crablike way. I realized suddenly all of us were watching him. Then Steele got up and went after him.

Willie was getting up on the balustrade. He always like to stand there and hold forth.

This time he didn't. He clutched himself in the weirdest way—as though all his insides had contracted, and before Steele could reach him, Willie swayed, lost his balance, and fell.

Though each movement of his had seemed to me in slow motion, it all happened in minutes.

Tigger's scream pierced into Willie's awful cry.

The rest of us surged out to the balcony. Steele blocked the way. "Stay back. Quickly! The way

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down? How do you get to that damn patio?"

He didn't wait for answers. He was out of the studio and down the stairs with Paul and Bertie following.

I looked over the balustrade.

Willie was speared by the forked branches of the fig tree. Some of the gray, wooden fingers stuck through his side, and I thought, through his throat.

For a moment it still seemed to me that he moved.

I was sick.

Lena, beside me, began to scream —high, hysterical, shrill shrieks.

Tigger reached her and slapped her smartly on the face. Luisa de la San Pilar was disappearing down the stairs.

"Get inside," Tigger said harshly. "Inside, I say. Get hold of her, Anne. I'll get some cognac. We need some—all of us."

To reach the small patio garden below, Steele, Paul, and Bertie had to leave the Palace and enter the courtyard adjoining. They met two Guardia Civil, clumping down the cobbled lane on their way down from the Cathedral. That is how it chanced that the police took immediate charge of Willie's death, relieving us of any responsibility.

As it was obvious that Willie was already dead, pierced by the sharp branches of the fig tree, the Guardia did not permit Steele and de Girandeau to take the body down.

"But you can't leave him like that!" Paul shouted.

"Until the officials arrive, *si*," said the peasant Guardia Civil stolidly. "I shall remain here. Jose will go for the police."

From the windows of the convent to which the little garden belonged, nuns looked out. They shouted to the Guards.

"Have we not said this will happen! How many times! Always that little man was prancing on the balustrade. Sometimes he even slept there, right on the edge. It's God's mercy he didn't tumble down before! Arrogance is punished, pride goeth before the fall. Do not hold God's gift of life lightly, that is in truth."

They were still calling these things down to the Guardia when the police arrived.

Upstairs, we had given Lena a knockout drink of cognac with two aspirins. I noticed she went to sleep in Willie's room.

Then, for something to do, I began to clean up the debris of the luncheon. I emptied the plates into the slop pail and on an impulse I poured the remaining soup into it too. I didn't think any of us would care to finish Willie's last soup.

Tigger watched me, white-faced and silent for a time. Then she said, "I suppose that's the best thing to do," and she took the slop pail and went off with it.

I put the salad stuffs, cheese and

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butter and bread, into the screened cupboard as carefully as though Willie still had further use for them. Then I poured the hot water Willie had set to heat into the big red earthen bowl, as I had often done before, and began to wash the dishes. My actions felt automatic and mechanical, as if someone had wound me up and then released the spring. I finished the glasses, the cups, the plates, the bowls, the silver, and then I was violently sick.

I was still cleaning up that mess when Tigger came back. The slop pail was empty and rinsed. She set it below the tiled sink.

"They've come."

"Who?"

"The police. They are downstairs now."

"I need a drink," I said.

I looked back on the clean kitchen, as tidy as if there had never been a luncheon party for eight people, and went into the studio. I poured myself a gin and drank it straight. Then I pushed the model stand to its usual place, replaced the bowl of flowers, realized the record player was still on though the last disc was finished, and switched it off.

Tigger stood by the fireplace staring down at the massed heap of gladioli and giant margueritas in a tall bowl, which Willie had placed there instead of logs. It would be months and months, I thought, before a fire would be needed. Willie would never need another one.

They came up the stairs in a slow tramp. Only when Luisa de la San Pilar entered the studio did I realize she had been down with them.

Paul went directly to the bar. Bertie slumped into the one big chair. Robert Steele stood staring out to the balcony which I'd always considered such a gay sunlit place. It seemed sinister now.

"The police?" Tigger said.

"They've gone," Bertie said. "Everybody, everything, gone."

"Yes," Robert Steele turned slowly from the arched doorway. "They've gone. And unless they perform an autopsy it's unlikely they'll come back."

He let his glance go slowly around the studio. "So you've cleaned up," he said. "Everything, I suppose? The plates? The soup? Coffee? Glasses?"

"I washed up," I said.

"I see."

"What are you driving at, Steele?" Paul's voice was sharp.

"Don't be a fool," Robert Steele said. "You know—you all know—that Willie was murdered."

"Now let's get this straight," Robert Steele said. "I don't intend to get involved in any scandal, not if I can help it. But all the same, while I knew your friend Willie but slightly, and what I knew of him didn't seem particularly savory, I can't sit by and see him callously

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knocked off without at least saying my piece."

He looked at us, carefully, one at a time. He'd asked me to get Lena and she was sitting beside me, dopey with sleep and shock.

"Well," he said.

"What makes you say Willie was murdered?" Bertie asked.

"Willie was poisoned," Steele said carefully, as though talking to children. "I'd say he was poisoned with Miss de la San Pilar's arsenic for the improbable horse. He began to feel ill about half an hour before he went onto the balcony. I was slow catching on—too slow. He fell because his muscles suddenly contracted, as they do with arsenic poisoning. Even less violent pain can knock you off balance. He was as good as dead before he hit that fig tree."

"What did the police say?" Tigger's voice was cool.

"The police were presented with a tableau: a dead man in a tree; shocked friends around him; nuns shouting circumstantial evidence to the effect that he was always sporting on that balustrade and they knew that one day he would fall.

"The police knew Willie. It wasn't as though they had to cope with some suspicious stranger. They also knew the aristocratic Miss de la San Pilar who has influence in Madrid. She speaks to them distractedly of the prostrate friends upstairs, of the pleasant luncheon party interrupted by this tragedy. They make the polite gesture of hauling away the unpleasant remains of the unfortunate host, and not bringing any more grief to his friends. Now, it is quite possible they will not think of an autopsy. Even in more damning circumstances, the Spanish are not partial to an autopsy. But *should* they think of it, I am sure they will find that Willie was poisoned."

He looked at us. "I'd like to find that little parcel of arsenic."

"What business is any of this of yours," said Tigger, pacing her words.

"Precisely," Paul said. "I fail to comprehend your interest or your right to interfere."

"I don't see that any good can come of going on and on about this—this accident," Bertie said.

"I agree," Luisa said.

"And you?" Robert Steele turned to Lena and me.

Lena shook her head as if it were loose on her neck, and then dropped her face into her hands.

"I don't know," I said. "I simply don't know."

After a moment Robert Steele said deliberately, "You ask what right I have to interfere. I have the right of every man who will not condone murder. Also, before Hollywood took me up, I was a private detective. During the war the army used me in the capacity for which I was trained, not as an entertainer. This, in a sense, is my business."

"But what possible *concern* could

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it be—of yours, I mean?" Paul said.

"I'm making it my concern. If I am not satisfied I shall make it my business to carry the whole thing to the authorities."

"What do you intend to do now?"

"I mean to learn the truth. I think it is to the advantage of all of you to tell the truth."

"And if we don't?" Tigger said.

"You will force me to go to the police, and I will insist on an autopsy."

"You have no evidence," Bertie said.

"There is the evidence of the arsenic in the body."

"Of that you are certain?" Paul asked.

"I'm sure of it, and so are you." He looked at Paul. "Why don't you start? Why did Willie ask you here today? What did he have on you?"

The two men looked steadily at one another. Then Paul de Girandeau gave a brief bow. "We may well have been comrades at arms, Mr. Steele. I too served with the Intelligence. I do not quite follow as to what you expect to accomplish by having all our stories, but if it will keep you from meddling further I see no alternative than to tell them to you. I trust what we say here will be confidential?"

"You may take that for granted," Steele said.

"Well, briefly, my friends," Paul de Girandeau said, "I believe Willie was about to threaten my happiness, the peace of my house. You all have known Astrid and myself since we came here as M'sieur and Madame de Girandeau. We are not married. This is a cause of great sorrow to Astrid. She is of the north, and most proper. However, she is a Protestant. My income comes to me from the estate of my grandmother who was very religious. That income would cease should I marry outside my faith. I love Astrid, and I believe I have the honor to be loved by her. While she would wish to legitimatize our state, I find it unreasonable to relinquish a considerable inheritance. So we compromise. We live the life of a married couple in places where we are not known, where the details of our private lives are less likely to be discovered. She will be distressed to hear that you know."

"Oh, hush, Paul," Tigger said quickly. "No one else needs to know."

Steele said, "And Willie found this out during his trip to Denmark?"

"I presume so, from his references to Astrid's family."

"But surely he could not have done much damage with this knowledge?"

"The gossip he could have started here would have ruined this peaceful retreat for us. I could quite easily have killed him. But with my hands, with my sword, so. Not with poison. This, I expect you to believe."

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Bertie said, "I believe you. Neither could I poison a chap."

Steele turned to him. "Ah, Mr. Vanderval, perhaps you will tell us with what Willie was threatening you? What were those references of his to paintings?"

"You caught that?" Bertie looked gray. His words came in a mumble. "The Mattiesen Gallery in Copenhagen—" he wiped his brow and neck with a big white handkerchief— "I've meant to straighten it out, really I have, and I'm going to, too."

"Will you tell us from the beginning, please."

"It was when I was starting the gallery here." Bertie stared at his own feet. "I was very short of funds. One night a private yacht berthed here. I opened the Gallery for the people on board. They bought quite a lot—really it was a life saver, those sales. But I did not realize they were buying for another gallery. There were some of Willie's things among the sketches I sold—he has hundreds, he paints —painted—an oil in an hour. I needed the money badly, then. I hadn't paid him." Bertie looked ready to cry. "I do a lot of good here," he said. "There isn't anyone else to help the artists here."

"Willie could have ruined you," Steele said.

Tigger got up quickly and went over to Bertie. Her ambers glinted faintly in the dull light. "Never mind, Bertie," she said. "It's all right, it will all turn out right."

"I wouldn't know where to start again."

"You don't have to, dear. You will stay here."

"When did you put the arsenic into his soup," Steele's voice was conversational.

"But I didn't," Bertie cried. "I told you I didn't!"

"Of course he didn't," Tigger said indignantly.

"Did *you?*" Steele asked.

I wondered how it was he was getting away with this. We were not a group easily intimidated, except for Lena. He sat, not like a judge, not like a policeman, but easily; yet they all seemed compelled to tell him their sad little secrets. As this morning on board the *Fair Lady* he had seemed the veritable corsair, now he fitted his new role, self-appointed, just as convincingly.

"But I would have, had I thought of it," Tigger said belligerently.

"Why?"

"You heard him. He needled everyone as he needled me, but me he really had behind the eight ball. Because of Leslie. My husband."

She looked helplessly at me.

"Leslie is good, kind, and eminently respectable," I said. "He's devoted to Tigger. Anything that would hurt Tigger would shock him."

I remember how recently someone had remarked that Tigger had quite a success with young men

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despite her age and shape. Leslie had happened to overhear the remark. There would have been a duel right there except that he had a serious seizure and had to be rushed to the clinic. He was in bed for a week afterward. Yes, I rather think Willie's tongue could have killed him.

"Surely they couldn't be such serious tales," Steele said.

Tigger looked thoughtful. "Perhaps not to you, or to me. But Leslie is old-fashioned. Whatever concerns me, even if it was thirty years ago on the Riviera, is immediate to him."

"But what was Willie hinting at?"

"He didn't hint. He told me. He'd heard about the mild black market that I'd got into after the First War. It kept me in stockings. Then there was Dickie Cousins. But he doesn't really matter."

"Surely there's nothing very alarming in any of that," Steele smiled for the first time.

"That's not all." She spoke so slowly I could hardly recognize her voice. "He mentioned Richard MacRitchie, you remember?"

She was looking at me, so I said yes I did.

"Did you ever hear of him?"

Steele said, "Vaguely. He was something of a tradition in those days, wasn't he?"

"A charming scoundrel," Paul de Girandeau said. "Thirty years ago I ran away on one of his boats. My family paid through the nose to get me out of that one. MacRitchie had many boats because the police kept confiscating them. I believe he finally had to disappear.

"A very charming scoundrel," Tigger said. "Well, Willie told me he's still alive."

"Is that bad?" Steele was still smiling at her.

"Why shouldn't it be?" Tigger snapped. "I was—am—married to him."

"Look," I said, "calm down, Tigger. There's Leslie. I've seen your wedding pictures. Family chapel, stately home, Devonshire. Twenty years ago at least—I could swear by the style of your dress, even if you hadn't told me. Twenty years of wedded bliss with Leslie."

"Yes, Anne. But all this time I've thought Richard was dead."

What could we say? We just looked at her.

Finally Tigger said, "What a pity I'm so respectable now! I'm so respectable I didn't kill Willie—and I regret it."

Unaccountably the sense of threat lifted a little. A few of us poured ourselves fresh drinks.

Steele turned to Lena. "You are . . . ?"

"Helen Brown. Just plain Brown. That's why I thought—I mean, a boy I met in Paris thought Lena would be a good name."

"Is that where you met Willie? Paris?"

"No. I'd been there a little over a

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year. I had this small amount of money my aunt had left me, and I thought I'd study art. I'd been pretty good at high school in art. Then some of us decided to hitchhike to Nice and the Riviera. I met Willie at this place St. Paul he was talking about. I was broke, and Willie said it was cheap here, and said he'd pay for my trip."

"What did you expect to do here?"

"Well, Willie said I could stay with him. He said he was lonely and he had lots of room. Then on the boat he said perhaps we'd get married."

"What did you think of that?"

"Well, he was sort of fascinating. I said I'd think about it. I wondered if he said that just so, as to, well, you know . . ."

"Get into bed with you," Tigger supplied.

"Yes, that."

"So then what happened?"

"So we got here, and it's awfully pretty, and for a bit he was nice to me. Then last night . . ."

"What happened last night?"

"Some people came off that boat and one of them said, 'Oh, Willie, your wife wants to know when you're coming home if ever'—something like that."

"Yes?"

"He had never told me he was married."

"Did you speak about it together—later, I mean?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"He said if I didn't like it I could get out." Suddenly, soundlessly, tears rolled down her cheeks, streaking them with mascara and making her look young, silly—and pitiful.

She said, "I haven't any money at all. Not a penny."

Paul de Girandeau whistled an almost inaudible tune through his teeth. "If you dislike staying here tonight," he said, "my wife and I will welcome you for some days in our home."

"I was about to say," Bertie put in, "that I need someone to help me at the Gallery. If you want a job, Lena . . ."

"We have a spare room," Tigger said.

"She can come to Formentera with me tonight, if she wants to," I said. I turned to Steele. "We *can* leave, can't we? The police didn't say we couldn't?"

"Certainly, you can all go to your homes. How are you getting to Formentera?"

"The Manolito leaves at three o'clock," I said. I looked at my watch. It was long past that. An extraordinary luncheon party.

"Tell me, Anne," Steele spoke to me directly, coldly. "Why did you wash the plates and the glasses?"

"Why? Well, it's normal, isn't it? One usually washes up after eating."

"You weren't doing it deliberately? To destroy evidence?"

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"To destroy what? Oh! I see. No, I don't think I'd thought of that, but as Tigger says, I wish I had. I mean—you know what I mean."

"You didn't see Senorita de la San Pilar's package of poison?"

"What did it look like?" I said.

Steele shrugged. Suddenly he looked tired. "Tell me, then," he said, "why were *you* asked here today?"

"Willie often asked me," I said. "I stopped here when I first came to the island. For how long was it, Tigger? Some months?"

"Did Willie know your husband?"

"I believe they met a few times."

"Was that before or after you were separated?"

"Before, I think."

He was looking at me almost sorowfully now. All right, ask me if I slept with Willie, I thought. You can browbeat some of the people some of the time. He didn't ask me.

I caught Tigger's look. It was straight and cool. For once in her life you couldn't tell what she was thinking about.

"Senorita de la San Pilar," Steele said, "why, really, did you buy the arsenic today? Is there a sick horse?"

I had forgotten about her. Now I turned to where she stood, dark and somber, her trousered legs crossed at the ankle, leaning against the mantel. She had small, slanting eyes which she narrowed to slits.

"No," she said, "there is no sick horse."

"The arsenic, then?"

"I bought it because I wished to purchase arsenic. That is clear?"

Steele sighed. Paul de Girandeau smiled grimly. Bertie and Tigger exchanged a quick look. I think all of us were beginning to wonder how Steel had got *us* into such an abject state of confiding.

"Well then, Senorita, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what it was Willie meant when he said he had met some friends of yours? That you could not enter France?"

"Indubitably he meant he had met some friends of mine. He has often heard me say I do not ever wish to go to France."

Unexpectedly Steele was angry. "Since you will not tell me, I will tell you," he said. "Even without Willie's hints, I would have known. There were many like you during and after the War. It is even possible I saw you in Paris. I also was there. But not as a collaborationist."

Luisa de la San Pilar lifted her head. "It is not correct to call a Spaniard a collaborationist during the wars of other nations. We were neutral. Not only that, but when we had need of help, you allied yourselves with our enemies. Only the Germans gave us aid."

"Why then have you thought it necessary to hide your preferences, past, so thoroughly? Why do you now seek us, not the Germans, as

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friends? I will tell you," Steele went on. "It is because you find us more useful now. You are an opportunist. They were your friends when they were winning. Now it is more advantageous for you to cadge off us. So you do not like to be reminded of the past which has made you such an enemy of France that you will never be permitted to visit there again. True?"

"You will think as you wish."

"This Willie found out and wrote you. That is the reason you bought the poison. You thought you could get away with it, as you got away with browbeating the police below, this morning?"

"Mr. Steele, it must amuse you to listen to yourself."

"Where is the packet?"

"If you speak of the arsenic, it was stolen from me the moment I entered this house. I have not seen it since. Now I must leave."

Perfectly composed, she picked up her *capacho* and strode across the studio. At the doorway, blocking it, the blotched stray dog of Willie's lifted its muzzle and whined at her. She stopped short.

Then she whirled on us, her control finally lost.

"I will tell you," she shouted. "I am like this poor wanderer, this homeless dog. I am tired of being chased by old hates, old fears, old mistakes. You betray for love, but does she remember! I'm tired of being pleasant to fools merely so I can eat. I am tired of poverty. I am *tired*." She took a long breath and glared at us. "I bought that powder to do away with myself. I thank the Virgin I have escaped that sin."

She left us in a well of silence.

Finally I said, "Well, I for one believe her."

"Shall we go home now," Tigger said wearily. "Is there anything else you would like to know about us, Mr. Steele?"

He shook his head. The deep tan of his face seemed gray.

"No," he said, "I can't think of anything else."

He gave Lena and me a ride back to the island of Formentera.

My place is an old farmhouse near the windmills. Its modernization does not include electricity.

I have been writing this by candlelight. With the flame I've just burned the empty wrapper in which the pharmacist had sold the arsenic to Luisa de la San Pilar. As a precaution, I suppose, to remind her it was poison, he had used a yellow and red rat poison folder.

It had the words on it, *Mata Ratas*—which means, Kill Rats.

Which it had, hadn't it?

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THE GIRL WHO LIVED DANGEROUSLY

by HUGH PENTECOST

(continued from page 85)

There wasn't any signature, but it didn't need any. I'd picked up dozens of slips like this off the floor for The Mountain. He had stooges planted on the staffs of most of the good hotels—runners to bring him bets—which was probably how he'd located me.

I took a taxi over to the bar and grill where he hangs out. He wasn't there. The bartender told me he'd left word he'd be back about nine if anyone asked for him. I figured I might as well eat there, so I went back to one of the booths and ordered a steak.

At three minutes past nine he came wheezing into the place, walked right past me to the rear booth, and sat down. I got up and went over to join him. He stared at me dully.

"I got your message," I said.

His pudgy hands rested against the edge of the table as if he wanted to push it away from his huge stomach. "I don't know who killed Buddy Lamar," he said.

"Neither do the cops," I said.

"I don't know who Alan Quist is," he said.

"But evidently you know about him."

He leaned forward. "Jeff, get out of town," he said. "Now. Tonight. Take your friend with you."

"What friend?"

"Quist," he said. "I know you, Jeff. You don't pick suckers for someone else to clean. You're planning to frame Lloyd."

I sat there frowning at him. I didn't like his knowing.

"It won't work," The Mountain said. "Don't go to the game. Don't let your friend go. Get out of town. Tamarak's dead. Lamar's dead. Let it lie."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked him.

"You've been a square guy in your league," he said. "If I'd figured this play, I'd never have steered you to Lloyd. I did you a bad turn. I'm trying to make up for it."

I glanced at my watch. It was twelve minutes past nine. I stood up. "Thanks," I said.

His buried-looking eyes floated up to mine. "You're 'way out over your head, Jeff. Deeper than you know."

I left him. I was lucky to get a cab right outside the joint. I gave him Judith's address, and we headed uptown. I have to explain one thing: if anyone else had told me I was over my head I'd have told him

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to go chase. The Mountain was another proposition. I never knew him to make a mistake on the odds. I didn't know his angle, but I figured maybe we better recheck things.

At Judith's I took the elevator up without announcing myself. I'd figured what we could do. We could phone Lloyd that Alan had got himself plastered and wasn't in any shape to play. The game would have to be put off. That would give us time to plan ahead, maybe even get The Mountain to talk.

The French maid opened the door for me.

"Madame and Monsieur Quist have left," she told me.

"Left! But I was to meet them here."

"*Oui,* Monsieur. They change their mind and have dinner out. They try to telephone you, but you have left your hotel. I am to tell you to meet them at the Hotel Kendall at ten o'clock."

I turned back to the elevator. That was that.

Any last hope I'd had of getting to talk to Alan in the clear disappeared when I was taken up to the fourteenth floor of the Kendall, to a suite which Lloyd had taken for the evening. Alan, Judith, and Lloyd were already there. There was another guy who looked familiar to me; he was introduced as Roger Borden, one of the more popular young leading men in Hollywood.

Mr. Borden, it seemed, had been very solidly cleaned by Lloyd on his last trip to New York and he was hoping to get some of it back.

"The motif is strictly revenge," he told me. "But strictly. I was lucky enough to run into Mrs. Hagan and Mr. Quist at dinner and discovered there was a game on—so here I am."

That told me one thing I wanted to know. He had been produced by Alan and Judith, not Lloyd.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" young Mr. Borden asked.

We weren't waiting for anything, it seemed. The room was an ordinary hotel sitting-room. A round poker table with a drop light hanging over the center of its green baize top had been set up, and there were cards and chips on it. Off to one side was a stretcher table loaded with every conceivable kind of liquor, plus ice, soda, and glasses.

Lloyd hadn't said a word since we came in. He had simply stood by the table, waiting for the small talk to end. For the first time I could see, ungloved, his slender, carefully manicured fingers which were going to be put to the business of giving us the works—unless we were smart.

Judith wasn't her usual bubbling self. She kept looking at Alan in a sort of speculative way. I had the unpleasant feeling that she was crazy enough to blow the whole thing and put us all in a bad hole. She was wearing a black dinner dress and her usual collection of

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bracelets and bangles and rings.

Well, we sat down at the table. I managed to grab a chair next to Lloyd. Judith was on the other side of him, with Borden next to her, and Alan on my right. The chips were valued at fifty, twenty, and ten dollars each—this was going to be murder right from the start.

Naturally, I was interested in Lloyd to the exclusion of everything else. The problem was to spot his particular method and then figure the right moment to expose him. I didn't expect anything so crude as marked cards, and I was right. After a couple of rounds I satisfied myself that both decks of cards in use were legitimate. Of course, Lloyd might switch something fancy into the game later. I had to watch for that.

I did get a laugh out of Judith. What women can get away with at a card table is fantastic. She had her handbag on the table. She'd keep opening it, fiddling with her compact or lipstick or handkerchief. Those doodads on her bracelets jingled like a toy music box. If any man made all the extra gestures and motions with his hands that she did, the game would have been off.

Lloyd was something else. The first time he dealt I saw him grip the cards in his left hand with that old mechanic's grip that's a dead giveaway to anyone who knows: thumb on top, almost touching the upper outer corner of the deck; index finger curled around the upper end; the other three fingers widely separated down the side of the pack. He dealt the cards with machine-gun rapidity. If he could second-deal or bottom-deal at the same tempo, he was going to be a tough monkey to catch.

Mind you, I didn't expect him to go right into his act. The game would be honest for a while. If Alan won a little bit, fine. If he didn't, Lloyd would probably see to it that he did. Then, after he was ahead a little, the roof would fall in. Lloyd was no greenhorn. We were set here for several hours and he wouldn't be greedy; his build-up would be artistic.

The game followed the script, all right. Alan won right from the start; relatively small pots, but he won. Young Mr. Borden was the chief loser, and unhappy! Judith and I dropped a little. Lloyd stayed about even. After about an hour of this the tide began to turn, slowly. I could feel a tingling sensation in my scalp. The time had come.

I have been in this business over forty years. I've seen all the best mechanics do their stuff. I have been a top-notcher myself, and I know all there is to know. As Alan began to lose I kept my eyes riveted on those slender white hands of Lloyd's. His body seemed to be motionless from the wrists up, but those hands flipped out the cards with lightning speed. I had never seen anyone as good as that. I began to feel panicky inside.

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Alan's losses began to snowball. He was already several thousand dollars behind, and the total was mounting. I knew there was no possible way he could pay. When the happy moment came for settling we were going to be really cornered—unless we could see what it was Lloyd was doing.

When you're trying to spot a mechanic you have your eyes and you also have your ears. Your ears will often detect the sound of a bottom-deal or a second-deal. All I could hear when Lloyd dealt those cards was the clocking of a tiny machine gun, rhythmic, regular.

I looked up at him after Alan had dropped another eight hundred bucks on one hand. Those pale blue eyes were expressionless, unblinking. But one corner of his mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile as his eyes met mine. It said everything was going very nicely.

On the next hand I had nothing and tossed in my cards. I pushed back my chair and went over to the side-table to pour myself a glass of water. I wanted to get rid of the cottony taste of fear in my mouth. The Mountain had been right. Lloyd was too much for me. I was out over my head.

And then, just as I was lifting my glass to drink, with my back to the table, I heard it—the unmistakable swish of a slick bottom-deal!

I had to fight to keep from spinning around. I turned very slowly, glass in hand. As I watched Judith, fascinated, I caught the flash of the middle knuckle of the left hand as she dealt from the bottom of the deck. She was good, very good, but she was human. No one can hide the flash of that knuckle as he slides the bottom card out. That was why some old-time hustlers used to amputate that joint—so it wouldn't show.

My heart was pounding against my ribs as I started back for my chair. It was hard to adjust to the idea, but I thought I had it, and it restored my confidence. Lloyd wasn't a miracle man! I hadn't been able to catch him—*because he wasn't doing anything!* Judith was the dealer—Judith who had completely disarmed us—Judith who took advantage of her sex to cover her dealing with those jangling bracelets and those fluttery feminine motions.

She had just finished her deal as I reached my chair. She looked up at me with a charming innocent smile. I smiled back, but it felt kind of frozen. I should have spotted her long before this.

Just as I pulled out my chair there was a knock on the door. Judith glanced at Lloyd.

"Keep your cards down, please," Lloyd said. He got up and went to the door. There was a bellboy standing outside. He handed Lloyd a message on a silver plate. Lloyd took it and started to close the door.

"There's a messenger downstairs waiting for an answer," the boy said.

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Lloyd turned away, ripped open the message. Then he crumpled it up and dropped it into his pocket. "Tell him the answer is that I'm sorry, I can't. I'm engaged."

"Thank you, sir."

The boy closed the door. Lloyd came back to the table and sat down. I looked at Alan, trying to get his attention. I noticed he'd taken the opportunity in the pause to produce his cigarette case and light a cigarette. He left the case lying beside him on the table as he picked up his cards.

"Sorry for the interruption," Lloyd said, and picked up his hand.

I knew what to expect now. Alan dropped a cool twelve hundred clams on that next hand. Well, at least I knew what we were up against. I wanted to watch Judith on the next deal, and then, the time after that I intended to call her.

Nothing much happened on the next four deals. Why should it? Those four deals were honest. Then once more, after Lloyd's cut, the bracelets jingled and that knuckle flashed its telltale story. I couldn't get Alan's attention. He was fiddling with his cigarette case.

As she finished dealing, Judith spoke to him. "Would you mind putting that cigarette case away, Alan? The light reflects against it."

"It's too late," Alan said, in a conversational tone.

She looked puzzled. "Too late?"

"It's a camera, Judith," he said. "A miniature camera."

The room was suddenly so still I had the feeling it might drop away into space. I glanced at Lloyd. He was a motionless statue, the tips of his fingers resting on the edge of the table. I saw young Mr. Borden's face glistening with sweat. I pushed my chair back an inch or two and planted my feet squarely, ready to move quickly.

"Camera?" Judith said. Her eyes were two globes of fire.

"I had to have evidence that would stand up in court didn't I, darling?" Alan said. He said the word "darling" as if it tasted bitter. "Hundreds of pictures of your very expert bottom-dealing, Judith."

I was proud of him for spotting her. I was dumfounded by this camera talk. The case looked like one I'd given him a year ago, but evidently he'd had it duplicated with a camera mechanism inside, one of those tiny jobs they used in the war. The raised enamel crest probably concealed the lens.

Judith's hand crawled along the edge of the table toward her bag.

"You deliberately framed this, Alan," she said.

"Very deliberately," Alan said. "You had *me* fooled, too, Judith. 'Never leave me. You could mean so much to me!'"

Lloyd's flat voice broke in. He still sat motionless, his hands in plain view. "You're not cops," he said. "What's the deal?"

"We want Lamar's gun," Alan said. "We want conclusive proof, or

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a statement from you declaring Lamar guilty of Joe Tamarak's murder. Jeff needs that to prove he killed Lamar in self-defense."

"And what happens to us if we give you that?" Lloyd asked.

"We take that camera, Alan," Judith said.

I turned back to her and saw that she had that little cannon of hers pointed straight at a spot between Alan's eyes.

His face was a study. He reached out his hand for the case. At the same moment the door to the room burst open. There were two men there, one of them with a regular press photographer's camera. A flashlight blinded me. Then I heard Judith scream.

Alan had taken that moment, which distracted her attention, to lunge across the table at her. His right hand twisted her wrist painfully, so that the little gun dropped on the green baize table-top. At the same moment Judith lowered her head and her teeth tore at the flesh of his hand. He brought his left hand across her face in a stinging slap that sent her staggering back against the wall.

"Did you get what you wanted, Grant?" Alan asked.

The *Globe* columnist grinned. "Chapter and verse," he said. I noticed that the photographer had already ducked away down the hall. "And there are two plain-clothes men waiting outside for your lady-friend and her accomplice."

"Better be careful of that camera, Alan," I said. "That's important evidence."

Alan laughed. "Camera? You know darn' well I don't own one, Jeff. But I had to get the lady to tip her hand somehow."

"Damn you, Alan! Damn you!" Once more Judith launched herself at him, her scarlet fingernails clawing at his face.

It took all the strength young Mr. Borden and I had to pull her away from him.

There were a lot of answers I needed to know. It turned out that while I'd slept that day Alan had set up a scheme with Grant Simon. At a certain moment a seemingly innocent message would be sent to Lloyd, that some friends wanted him to join them at a party. The idea was to give the bellboy a chance, while Lloyd read the message, to fix the catch on the door so it could be opened from the outside. If this was successful, Alan was to make his play at once.

They'd expected the play was to be against Lloyd, but Alan, like me, had finally spotted Judith. They figured the gag about the camera would drive Lloyd—as it turned out, Judith—to give himself away in an effort to get the supposed incriminating pictures. Simon and his photographer were outside the door, with two cops, ready to act the minute the explosion took place.

"I'd expected to have a chance to

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explain the whole thing to you over the phone," Alan told me, as we waited at police headquarters to make a statement. "But we missed connections. You see, Mr. Borden, the movie star, was part of the plant."

He smiled bitterly. "I wanted another witness besides Judith. She really fooled me, Jeff—I trusted her. But I was afraid her past connection with Lloyd would make her testimony weak. Simon knew that Borden had been taken by this mob and would be eager to help catch them. That had to look natural, so I persuaded Judith to go out to dinner instead of having it at her apartment, and arranged with Borden to bump into us 'by chance.' I still hoped to reach you, but it didn't pan out."

It was George Lloyd, in a long statement to the police, who told us other things that filled in the picture, and, incidentally, helped to put me in the clear on Lamar's death. Lloyd was eager to talk, in the hope of beating a murder rap.

He and Judith had worked together for a long time. It was a perfect tie-up. He posed as the big-time gambler, she as the innocent excitement seeker. He'd been suspected from time to time, but nobody got anything on him because he was clean. It was Judith who was the mechanic and, until tonight, unsuspected. It was Judith who really bossed the show.

"There's one thing Jeff and I don't understand," Alan said to him. "Why was Tamarak killed? Why run that kind of risk when your loss was relatively small?"

Lloyd was silent for a moment, those pale, hooded eyes looking away into space. "Judith is—I suppose you'd call it 'psychotic,'" he said. "You see, her father was Max Barretto. He was a hustler, too, on a magnificent scale. He and Judith were like that!" Lloyd crossed two of his slender fingers. "It was a real father-and-daughter thing. Then Judith fell in love with a young man named Kelly Hagan. They were engaged to be married at the time that Max Barretto was framed and sent to Atlanta. What most people don't know is that Hagan was in on that frame-up. Oh, he fell in love with Judith, all right, crazy in love. He didn't think she'd ever find out about his involvement with her father. But Max Barretto knew, and he told her!"

"And she went ahead with the marriage?" Alan asked incredulously.

"She went ahead with it," Lloyd said, "for just one reason. To get Hagan. I don't know what happened the night he supposedly shot himself. Nobody does. I could guess, but I won't. The suicide story held up with the police."

"I see," Alan said.

Lloyd shrugged. "Then Judith tried every known way to kill herself—ski jumping, auto racing, mountain climbing in Switzerland. She never got worse than a broken

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collarbone. During the war she was a ferry pilot. Then, after that, she turned to her father's old profession. He'd taught her everything he knew. She was good."

"Damn' good." I said.

"There was just one quirk in her character, gentlemen. If she thought someone was trying to frame her—as her father had been framed—she insisted on paying off. So help me, it was a kind of blood lust! I begged her to leave Tamarak and that Argentine alone. She wouldn't listen. She'd hired this Buddy Lamar, a trigger-happy lunatic, as a sort of bodyguard. The harbor police may come up with what the fish haven't eaten of the Argentine's body some day. Tamarak got his, as you know. If she'd guessed what you two were up to, she'd have killed you, even if she'd had to do it in the middle of Times Square."

Alan looked down at his hands, frowning.

"What I don't understand," I said, "is why she helped me get away from The Circus Club after I'd killed Lamar? Why didn't she blow my head off, then and there?"

Lloyd shifted those pale eyes of his my way. "I think you'll never be in greater danger again—and live," he said. "I think she meant to kill you. But she has one weakness, Mr. Larigan."

"What's that?"

Lloyd's mouth twitched in a faint smile. "Hustlers," he said. "You and she belonged to the same union. Somehow you made her believe your story. And, actually, she had nothing to fear, with Lamar dead. That must have occurred to her when she cooled off." Then he laughed, and it was a strange sound coming out of those thin lips. "If it hadn't been for me, none of this would have happened. She didn't want to play this game tonight. She wanted to call it off. But I pressured her to go through with it because I fell for your story, too—the oil well story! We needed money."

"Why did she want to call it off?" I asked.

"Forget it, Jeff," Alan interrupted sharply.

"That's right, Mr. Quist," Lloyd said. "She'd fallen for you. You see, there was one thing Judith wanted just about as badly as she wanted excitement. A man she could trust and love."

Alan stood up, and a little muscle rippled along his jaw. "Let's get out of here, Jeff," he said.

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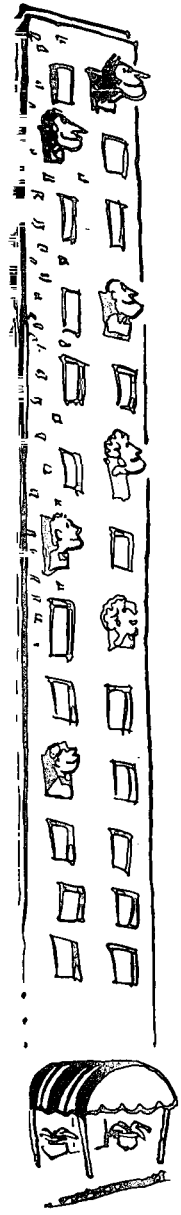

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